

Jan Rosseel: Back-up

MEMORY AND MEDIA
DE BRAKKE GROND

Essay (EN)
Part 1/3

10 Dec 2016 until 29 Jan 2017
Amsterdam

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FOREWORD

The term back-up suggests the existence of original files. An instant of an original reality. Artist Jan Rosseel offers his idiosyncratic take on this with the exhibition *Back-up*. He presents a collection of new works on representation's mechanisms and memory's potential deceit. For De Brakke Grond the exhibition is the finale to the themed year *All Future Memories* (February 2016 – January 2017), which examined the future of memory. On the basis of our shared interest in storytelling and the ambition to critically study how stories are told, De Brakke Grond invited Jan Rosseel to further elaborate

on the investigation he started during his residence at Society of Arts/NIAS.

As a *visual storyteller*, Jan Rosseel has a strong urge to clarify developments he sees around him. His work is how we remember, deform and forget events. He hereby asks questions that are of great importance today in the Netherlands, Flanders and beyond. His artistic practice is fed by his multifarious background as a chef, journalist, student of Chinese and documentary photographer, and this enables him, as a researcher, to link various perspectives and fields. He captures these new ties and insights in images. Sometimes they only touch briefly on a perspective, sometimes he dissects them to the bone. De Brakke Grond will therefore 'only' present the first edition of *Back-up*. A snapshot of this image research that develops, questions itself, remains critical, transforms perspectives and subsequently moves forward again.

Veerle Devreese
Programmer for Visual Art and Culture
– De Brakke Grond

SAVING AND OVERWRITING IMAGES

Something cropped from an image is a new image that – in turn – new images can be discovered in. The tiniest fragment of an image is a coloured dot. Nowadays these dots are pixels and even the latter are independent, meaningful images. This awareness is important when viewing, experiencing or understanding the works that comprise the exhibition *Jan Rosseel: Back-up*. His investigation of our collective memory is image driven. The latter are often highly iconic, analog photographic images from the end of the 20th century. However, his research also encompasses TV images, digital photography and video images, drawings and computer-generated images. The various media remind us of the many means of image produc-

tion that took off in the 20th century and seem to be expanding exponentially in the 21st.

Boundless images

The ease with which images can be created and shared indicates their importance in contemporary life. Images make it possible to experience events elsewhere on the planet. These images from somewhere else often inform our experiences here. Rosseel's exhibition presents a new video work made as a response to the video of the beheading of the American freelance press photographer James Foley that was posted to YouTube on 19 August 2014 by IS. Rosseel collaborated with choreographer Jasper van Luijk for this work. Rosseel's *Foley* is the artistic result of his examination of the logic behind contemporary image production. It may be considered in relation to the many other responses to the IS video created by TV news studios and political bodies. President Obama's response, his words and movements, are comparably choreographed.

Iconic images

A number of images Rosseel used have – thanks to their powerful visual impact – come to symbolise historic events or even eras. The interesting thing about iconic images is that they represent more than they actually depict. For example,

the images of the smoking twin towers are now inextricably connected to the start of a decade-long war on terrorism in a media-rich world. A photo of the World Trade Center during 9/11 can be found in the work *Flash Memory*. However, the image will slowly fade to black the more it is viewed as Rosseel printed it on photographic paper that wasn't fixated during the developing process so light continues to affect the emulsion. In this way, our memory's reliability has been equated with that of the photographic image. Everyone who views it, helps affect it until it disappears.

Unknown images

The image the Obama administration released to mark the end of the war on terror can be seen in Rosseel's work *Osama Bin Laden Situation Room*. It doesn't originate from operation Neptune Spear itself that was conducted on 2 May 2011 at 01:00 to eliminate Osama Bin Laden. Instead a photo by the White House photographer Pete Souza was published of the situation room where the president oversaw the attack on Bin Laden's home with his military and political staff. It is an image of the people viewing what may not be seen. Its use to commemorate the end of the war on terror strongly influences our perceptions of this history.

Missing images

Another part of Rosseel's exhibition refers to a different politically charged murder of which there are also no images available. Patrice Lumumba the first democratically elected president of Congo was assassinated on 17 January 1961. The Belgian and American governments, with the aid or collusion of other Western government bodies, had developed several scenarios for eliminating Lumumba. Committed at the height of the Cold War and the wars of independence in Africa, this was one of the most significant political murders of the 20th century. Besides Lumumba's teeth that were extracted as trophies there is no visible evidence of this event. Would it be remembered differently if images did exist? How would we then judge the Belgian and American intervention in the recently independent Congo?

Postcolonial representation

The above questions arise in an exhibition space that features various images of Congo from a colonial Belgian perspective. From a Belgian stock brand's collectable pictures of Congolese indigenous people to Tintin comics. These images bear witness to a colonial take on the world that was commonplace for far too long. From a contemporary perspective ethical boundaries were

so clearly trodden underfoot that the collected images visualise the painful absence of other histories. But we can't go back in time to undo the images. Moreover, the worldview seems internalised in the historic material. Does history change if we scrape away images?

Image violence

Many of the exhibition's historic images show visible suffering which can reveal the journalistic perspective of their makers who focused on a conflict. Oddly enough when it comes to the 'napalm girl' the suffering is the photographic image's strength; to a certain extent it can transmit the pain and instil a sense of horror. Questions elicited by such images are often an extension of how much violence is perpetrated upon someone by taking a photograph or witnessing atrocities. And, at the same time, images can also be violent in entirely different ways. Whereas journalistic images are based on empathy, drone camera images have a cold, searching, recording perspective. And the images of the front in Mosul streamed using Facebook Live make us consider how much violence can be done to images of violence by floating emoticons.

The exhibition *Jan Rosseel: Back-up* highlights the many ways of dealing with images. From

slowly letting iconic images fade to black to comparing manipulated photographs, to responses to gruesome news images consisting of the creation of new video footage. Images have been superimposed over other images, images have been extracted from images, pixels have been scaled-up to furniture. By interacting with images in this variety of ways we can come to understand that what we see in them is something else than the meaning we assign to them. In other words, the images bring together opposing categories: viewing and reading, remembering and forgetting, history and current affairs.

Jan Rosseel (1979) studied documentary photography at the Royal Academy of Art The Hague, photo journalism at the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus and Chinese Languages and Culture at Leiden University and Shandong University. He received various prizes and nominations for his first project *Belgian Autumn. A confabulated History* including the Prix Pictet, the Dutch Doc Photo Award and Foam Magazine Talent 2014. In 2015, he was the first Artist in Residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies to receive a grant which he used to conduct research into the relationship between images and memory.

His work has been published by, among others, the NY Times, Huffington Post, De Standaard, de Volkskrant and Vrij Nederland. Rosseel has exhibited at FOAM Amsterdam, Photoville NY, RPS Gallery in Tokyo, 10b Gallery in Rome, FoMu Fotomuseum Antwerpen and the Nederlands Fotomuseum Rotterdam. Jan Rosseel is represented by The Ravestijn Gallery Amsterdam.

Joram Kraaijeveld (1984) is the guest curator for *Jan Rosseel: Back-up*. Kraaijeveld is a curator, lecturer and author. Kraaijeveld is Content Director at Platform BK. He studied fine art at the AKV | St. Joost in Breda and Philosophy and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. In 2016 he was the curator-in-residence at Schloss Ringenberg. He has previously worked as an assistant curator at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam where he curated exhibits including *Antonis Pittas - hold on*, *Ruti Sela*, *Alexandra Navratil - This Formless Thing* and *Uli Westphal - Transplantation*. Kraaijeveld worked for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven as a guest curator and researcher where he put together the exhibition *The View from Here*. He teaches art theory at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. He is also a member of the board of the Frankendael Foundation in Amsterdam. His articles have been published in, among other publications, *Metropolis M*, *Kunstbeeld* and *Kunstlicht*.

Trilogy

Jan Rosseel: Back-up is a co-production of Flemish Arts Centre De Brakke Grond, Stroom Den Haag and Museum Dr. Guislain. An exceptional exhibition process, involving Jan Rosseel creating new work which he then develops further over a period of a year and a half and then presents at three successive exhibitions, each one with a different focus:

De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
10 Dec 2016 until 29 Jan 2017
Focus – Media

Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent
4 Mar 2017 until 19 May 2017
Focus – Psyche

Stroom Den Haag
2 Dec 2017 until 18 Feb 2018
Focus – Politics

Co-production



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TINTIN AU CONGO



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