

Jan Rosseel: Back-up

MEMORY & POLITICS
STROOM

Essay (EN)
Part 3/3

2 Dec 2017 until 18 Feb 2018
The Hague



Foreword Stroom

What do we personally remember of collective events? What makes an image iconic? Can we even forget historical events in our own times – with so many images of them being produced? And in which ways are our personal and collective memories stored for the future?

Over the past five years, these questions served as a point of departure for the artistic research of photographer and ‘visual storyteller’ Jan Rosseel. This research intensified even further during a fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) in 2015. Rosseel was the very first artist to be awarded this honor. As a NIAS fellow – and surrounded by scholars – the artist researched the transience of collective and personal memories. For example, he made an in-depth study of various forms in which history is visualized, as well as examined the impact of technological developments on the representation of violence and conflict.

Insights gained in this period form the foundation for Rosseel’s project *Back-up*, which takes the shape of three consecutive

exhibitions. In *Back-up*, Rosseel presents a number of new works that reflect his fascination for the complex relationship between memory, image and imagination. During this 18-month exhibition program, the artist will be making new work, developing ideas further and focusing his attention on a variety of themes.

After previous exhibitions at Flemish Arts Center De Brakke Grond in Amsterdam and Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent (B), this triptych will be concluded at Stroom Den Haag. The presentation in The Hague focuses on memory in relation to politics and power – how our memory forms and influences both history and our future. The central theme of the exhibition is the trial of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu in 1989. This theme connects to the very foundations of Rosseel's research: the merging of personal recollections, the shaping of our collective memory and history by the media and the role played by public perception and images in these processes.

Alison Landsberg's books *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* and *Engaging the Past* were important sources of inspiration for Rosseel. That is why we asked Professor Landsberg to write an essay especially for this exhibition brochure. In addition, this publication presents images and text pertaining to Jan Rosseel and his work.

A special Stroom School program will be organized parallel to the exhibition, that connects Rosseel's work to scholarship and other sectors in society.

Moreover, this exhibition of Jan Rosseel's work is the first in an annual series of presentations through which Stroom helps talented Hague artists to raise their national and international profile and encourages them to strengthen their work and develop it in greater depth.

Arno van Roosmalen
Director of Stroom Den Haag



Urine



Fear sweat





Film developer/rust



Stale

AFFECTIVE MEMORIES

How do we access the past? Both as individuals and as cultures we look back, sometimes hoping and other times fearing, that the past will inform the present, that it will shape our identities, both individual and collective, and that it will open up paths of action for the future. This turn to the past takes the form of either history or memory. History in its most traditional, academic iteration claims itself to be authoritative, trustworthy, rigorous; it relies on evidence, research, footnotes. It claims for itself a kind of objectivity and privileges critical distance. History addresses its reader as if from across a chasm, it speaks in the language of



logic and cognition, and it privileges linearity and chronology. Memory, by contrast, tends towards the private, admits to being subjective, and can make no claims to reliability; it is subject to the vagaries of time, influenced by fantasy and desire. Memory tends to be associative rather than linear and always has a strong affective dimension. Memory is engaged not

first and foremost cognitively, but through the senses: sights, smells, sounds.

But in the era of mass culture, the contours of both memory and history have changed. With the advent of film and television in the twentieth century and the proliferation of cell phone cameras and social media in the twenty-first, images, videos and narratives about world historical events circulate with unprecedented velocity. As such it has become possible for people to come into intimate contact with events occurring well beyond their own lived experience. Unlike words on the printed page, images, films, and videos reach out, touching their viewers, “seiz[ing]” them, as cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer famously wrote in 1940, “with skin and hair.” Kracauer suggests that “the material elements that present themselves in film directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*.”¹ This audiovisual mode of address is both personal and affective; our bodies respond viscerally to what we see. It is under these conditions that one can have a personally felt public memory, that a public past can become personalized; it is precisely this experience that Jan Rosseel’s work explores.

In the era of television, world-historical public events penetrate the private sphere,

bringing ordinary people into intimate contact with events outside their lived experience, perhaps even changing what counts as *lived* experience. When dictators Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were captured by revolutionaries, brought to emergency trial, and then executed for their crimes, cameramen filmed the proceedings. Those films were broadcast to the Romanian people on national television. Through the mass media, that world-historical event became part of the lives of individual Romanians. Seeing it with their own eyes, at close range, meant that it had visceral effect. Whether it was shock they felt, or joy, or fear, the event entered their personal archive of experience. Those who saw it remember it, remember where they were and how they felt when it happened.

I have called these personal, deeply felt public memories of events that one did not experience directly, prosthetic memories². Prosthetic memories are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience. I call these memories *prosthetic* because they are not natural, not the product of lived experience, but are derived from engagement with a mediated representation: a photograph, a film, a televisual newscast. These are sensuous

memories produced by an *experience* of mass-mediated representations; like an artificial limb, they are actually worn on the body. Like the memories of actually-lived events, prosthetic memories, too, have the ability to shape a person's subjectivity, politics and ethics. Because they have a powerful affective dimension, these memories are formative. They shape how we feel and what we think. Even though prosthetic memories do not derive from lived experience in the traditional sense, it is because they touch us deeply and have personal meaning for us, that they become part of our archive of experience and orient us politically, towards action. They open up trajectories, paths forward. As Jan Rosseel's work suggests, these memories have an afterlife, can be reactivated in the present.

As I suggested above, the mass circulation of images, videos, and narratives, and their often immediate, visceral, affective mode of address have ramifications for history as well; the once-clear line between history and memory has blurred. Because of the proliferation of images and videos, and their mass circulation on the internet and through social media in the twenty-first century, fragments of the past persist. We see these moments, and they can be narrativized and renarrativized, depending upon

the needs of the present. This renarrativization can serve utopian or dystopian ends. In its dystopian form, the past is evoked to justify an unjust present. But in its utopian form, this renarrativization of the fragments of the past is nothing less than the fulfillment of the radical promise of history itself. History, wrote Walter Benjamin in 1940, offers a glimmer of hope for redemption in a barbarous world. The past, says Benjamin, “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized,” and it is the task of the historian “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”³ Rosseel’s images might be just such an attempt, as they materialize the past in the present, conjuring its affective charge. To understand the stakes of this project, is to recognize the urgency of history for the present.

NOTES

- 1 Miriam Hansen, “With Skin and Hair: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseilles, 1940,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (spring 1993), 458, italics in original.
- 2 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- 3 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 255.



Old books

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.

Alison Landsberg is an internationally recognized scholar in the field of memory studies. Her book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia UP, 2004) considers the way in which individuals are increasingly able to take on memories of events they did not live through. She is interested in the potential of such memories to produce empathy and to become the grounds for progressive politics. Her more recent book, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (Columbia UP, 2015), explores popular modes of engagement with the past in contemporary mediated society, and the ramifications of those modes of engagement for the projects of history and politics. Considering a wide range of history texts, historical fiction films, TV historical dramas, Reality History TV, Immersive History Museum websites, among others, this book engages with the dynamics of the experiential to explain both what it makes possible for people and what it obscures or refuses. *Engaging the Past* suggests that these popular engagements pose some fundamental challenges for our sense of what constitutes history in the 21st century, but also that academic historians need to take more seriously the kind of work popular media can do in the production of historical knowledge.

Alison Landsberg is Professor of History and Cultural Studies at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, USA.





Gunpowder



Petrichor

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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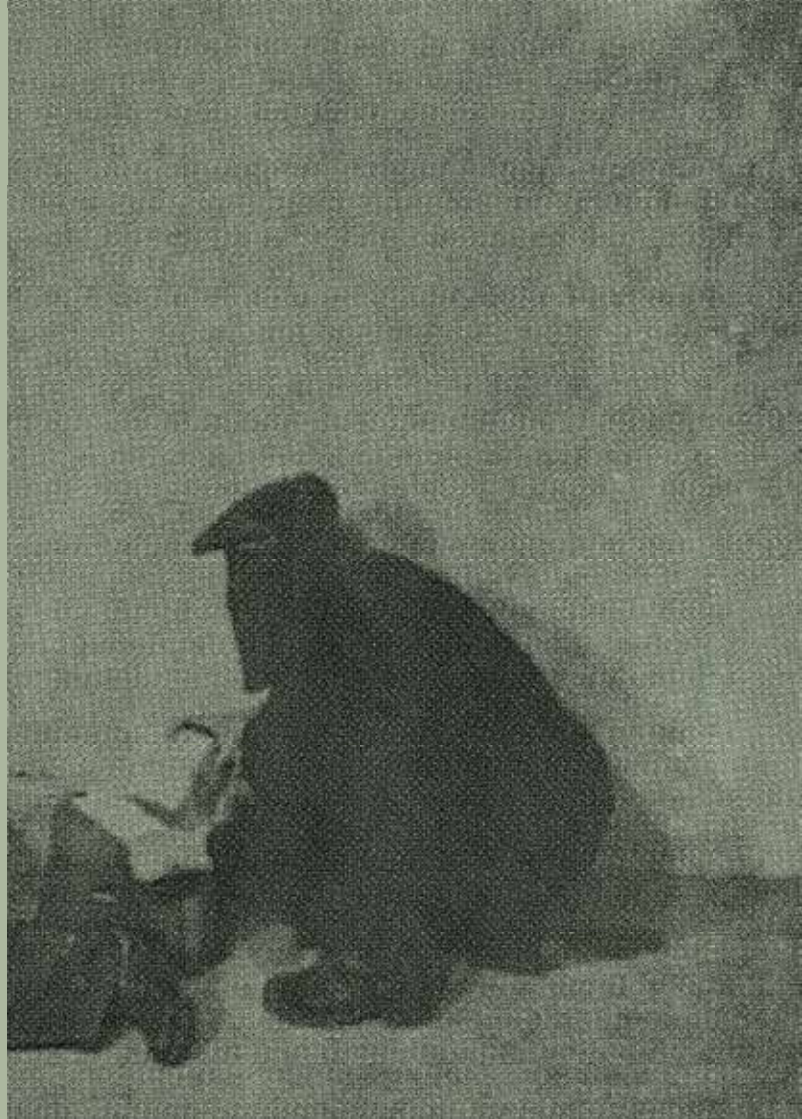
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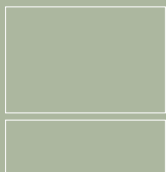
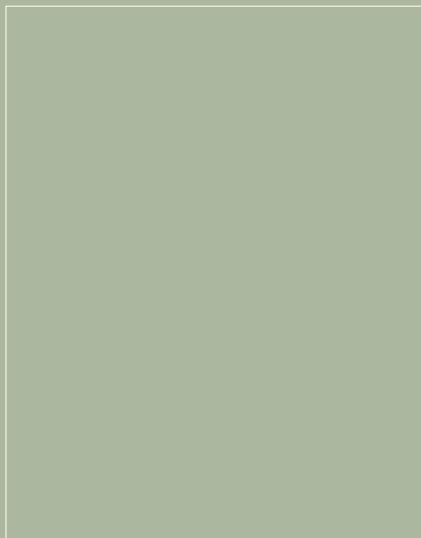
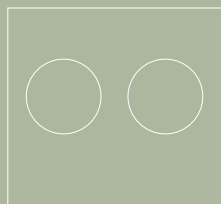
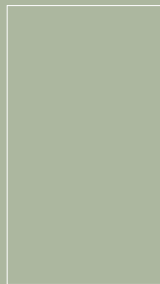
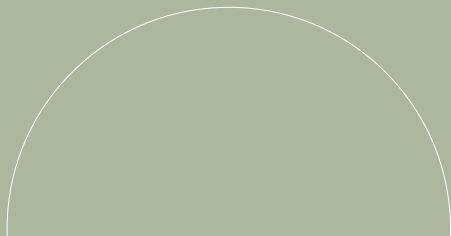
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