

Trauma and allegory: truthfulness in fact and fiction. Making a private archive productive

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Abstract

Herengracht 401 (H401), until 2019 known as *Castrum Peregrini*, represents the complex and intriguing history of a hermetic community of artists and scholars in Amsterdam which was formed in the years of the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands, 1940–1945. This article attempts to take stock on what we have learned in these ten years about the history of the place, as an indicator of memory politics. It also reflects on the hermeneutic gap of what we cannot know of H401's history as we lack experiential knowledge of eyewitnesses. As the author argues below, the site of H401 shows how the 'hermeneutic gap' can offer a chance to make an archive, such as in the case of 'the house on Herengracht 401', productive and meaningful through the artistic practice of research.

Key Words

Herengracht 401 (H401), Second World War, archive, hermeneutic gap, art-based research

Introduction

Herengracht 401 (H401), until 2019 known as *Castrum Peregrini*, represents the complex and intriguing history of a hermetic community of artists and scholars in Amsterdam which was formed in the years of the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands, 1940–1945. Managed by a private foundation, the house was transformed into a cultural centre in the past ten years. H401's activities use the historic fabric of the house on Herengracht 401 as an archive for an interdisciplinary and thematically driven programme wherein the relationship between memory and art plays a central role. Kathy Carbone reminds us of the nature and role of the archive after the archival turn and argues that, although historically embedded, the archive is 'not about the past but about the future of the past and is a vital source for inquiry as well as a subject of inquiry that can inspire new ways of envisioning and living in the world.' (Carbone 2020). It is exactly in this sense

that H401 focuses on their historic fabric as a source to think about the societies we live in today and how these can become more inclusive. It is with this ambition that H401 engages in (artistic-) research projects locally and internationally, as well as networks concerning actual debates around spaces of memory, traumatic heritage, conflict and the politics of the past in the present.¹ This article attempts to take stock on what we have learned in these ten years about the history of the place, as an indicator of memory politics. It also reflects on the hermeneutic gap of what we cannot know of H401's history as we lack experiential knowledge of eyewitnesses. As we will argue below, the site of H401 shows how the 'hermeneutic gap' can offer a chance to make an archive, such as in the case of 'the house on Herengracht 401', productive and meaningful through the artistic practice of research.

The history of Herengracht 401 can be divided into different periods during and after WWII. During the war, the danger from the outside world and the sheer survival

¹ On Fanaticism FIT (EU Grundtvig funded, 2009–2011), TimeCase – Culture is Memory in Action (EU Multilateral project, 20012–2014), European Academy of Participation (EU Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership 20015–2017), Heritage Contact Zone (EU Creative Europe, 2018–2020), SPEME – Spaces of memory (EU Horizon 2020, 2018–2022)



Figure 1. The Building Herengracht 401.

was a constituting feature of the group. After the war, the group needed internalisation of the group-defining forces that used to come from the outside to stay together as an alternative community. The war-time trauma was sublimated with a cult to maintain the feeling of togetherness and belonging only to bring back the pain much later in another shape and form.² With critical distance in time and space, some eyewitnesses were able to identify their pain as trauma. The complexity of the history in which it is rooted is so dense, that distance in time and culture makes it difficult to understand and empathetically connect with this history in a straightforward, unmediated way.

The concept of the allegory helps to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of artistic interventions and research to create such access to a past that otherwise stays locked by simplified images of trauma or heroism. Some examples of

artistic interrogation of the H401 archive showcase the potential of creative work with historical objects that enables fiction as a point of identification for a broad audience. The focus on ‘form’ (material artistic expression) complements the focus on content (conceptual artistic expression), theory and truth, which is the prevailing paradigm in the contemporary art world and its moral consensus (Pfaller 2020).

The artists and their work presented here do not lean on a preconceived truth or theory and, instead, value material, fiction and the unknown. Their works reveal a relevance of heritage and memory that would otherwise stay out of reach for the audience. They suggest that art and creative research can be free of any purpose, such as healing of trauma or showing truth. Their transformative power unfolds by having no other goal than creating meaning through their own artistic methods. Through this research practice, the artist builds an autonomous relationship to the historic fabric. These artworks, like any good fiction, create moments of identification and empathy for the viewer. They encourage the viewer to adopt a truthful view of history by applying the lens of their own life experience. My personal situation can fuel a unique and critical bond with history by questioning my own thinking and thereby developing a critical perspective on my own position. The role of arts here could be called ‘ethical’, supporting the viewers to question their own ability to take responsibility for their views and actions, as opposed to a prefabricated moralistic answer to the problems of today. Whereas contemporary conceptual art can sometimes fall prey to a moralistic and predetermined reading of the past, the artists presented here put a focus on form (as opposed to concept) and object (as opposed to theory) as ingredients for an open-ended research process to connect with an incomprehensible past. The ‘auto-fiction’ they produce, the stories that reflect their own history or world view, encourage the viewer to form their own views in a similarly autonomous and empathetic way, as a critical self-investigation.

What we seem to know

(Auto-)biographical-, anthropological- and justice driven history writing

In the autumn of 1999, I entered Herengracht 401 in Amsterdam for the first time. The labyrinth of rooms full of objects and stories fascinated me as it fascinates everyone

² Traumatic experiences of the group hidden at Herengracht 401 in Amsterdam could be described under various viewpoints. Persecution had forced two Jewish young men underground, F.W. Buri and C.V. Bock. Both have published memories in which they give accounts of raids, hunger, illness, loss of beloved ones (cf. Claus Victor Bock, *Untergetaucht unter Freunden*. Amsterdam 1985). In addition, the ones who organised the hiding, Wolfgang Frommel and Gisèle van Waterschoot van der Gracht had both engaged in a love affair with Buri, which almost broken the groups bond. The traumatic impact of this for all involved was described by Buri himself in: *Ich gab Dir die Fackel im Sprunge*, Berlin 2009 and by Gisèle in letters to friends quoted in Annet Mooij, *Het Eeuw van Gisèle*, Amsterdam 2018. Central aspects of the group-defining cult were ritual poetry readings and more generally reading out loud during communal meals, commemorative get-togethers, publishing memory books and the journal *Castrum Peregrini*; pedagogical friendships formed a particular aspect that has been described by Frank Ligtvoet (Vrij Nederland 2017) as toxic, by others as existentially positive experiences. Buri notes that Frommel did not want to miss the war-time community: “Wenn es nach Wolfgangs Wesen und Vorstellung gegangen wäre, hätte alles so bleiben können, wie es war” (cf. Wolfgang Frommel, Friedrich W. Buri, *Briefwechsel 1933–1984*, ed. Stephan Bischoff, Göttingen 2017, p.39).



Figure 2. Gisèle in her studio on the top floor. 1960s.

who enters the building. Back then, the centre of this hidden universe was undoubtedly the painter Gisèle (1912–2013), who loved to show visitors around and tell stories of a world of friendship and art. The way Gisèle looked at things was full of wonder and she could spark a sense of amazement of the beauty of small things. I learned that Gisèle and two other old men living in the house at that time, Manuel Goldschmidt and Claus Bock, were connected by their joint experience of war, persecution and survival on one floor of the house during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands. The central figure in their stories from the past was the parlour scholar Wolfgang Frommel (1902–1986), whom they adored.

The stories of Frommel and Gisèle were somehow glorious. Although they also told stories of hunger, police raids and loss in war and concentration camps, they always ended in the wondrous survival through reading or writing poetry and, if the real story had not ended well, then at least that loss was not in vain. The memory of someone who had not survived, such as Vincent Weyand (1921–1945), who died in the concentration camp Buchenwald, was celebrated like that of a saint. Trauma seemingly did not exist. The horrors of the past were, instead, sublimated in rituals of commemoration (e.g. poetry readings) and by awarding meaning to suffering and death (e.g. memory books). Similar to ancient Greek tragedies, there was no space for trauma, only for tragedy, pain and glory, gods and heroes, poetry and friendship. The post-war generation of friends around Frommel and Gisèle also internalised these stories that functioned as a

founding and binding mythology of their own community, as an alternative form of belonging in a post-war society of petty-bourgeois values, but also later, as an alternative to the alternatives that came forth from the student movement.

When the last Jewish hider from the war, Claus Bock, died in 2008, the literary magazine that was published by the survivors under the name *Castrum Peregrini* since 1951, ceased to exist. Its director since 1999, Michael Defuster, had formulated the mission of turning the hermetic and anachronistic activities of a community that had dissolved (with the exception of a few individuals and Gisèle who had survived them all) into outward orientated activities that would make a relevant contribution to contemporary society. This did not go without a struggle against the remains of the old circle that perceived opening up as betrayal.³ However, with patience and persistence and the building up of a new network of individuals and institutional collaborators, Defuster managed the change, which I witnessed as a colleague and friend.

The first public interdisciplinary thematic year programme took shape in 2009. The programme of exhibitions, symposia, publications, theatre etc. tried to shed light on themes like fanaticism, freedom, friendship and cultural memory. The activities reflected upon the themes on a meta level so as to allow for discussions of broad relevance. The heroic history of the house provided narrative anchors towards topical issues. Its interiors, presented as a carefully curated archive of deceased heroes, provided conversation pieces from which to approach social problems of today.

The main source of narratives were the few witnesses still alive or texts that had been published by the community in their magazine *Castrum Peregrini*. Therefore, we felt the growing need for a critically distanced history-writing and, in 2011, took the initiative to have a biography written of Gisèle's life. We found Annet Mooij, who, in 2012, started to scrutinise the existing archives (Gisèle's own archive is vast) and interview eye-witnesses. The biography was finally published in September 2018 (Mooij 2018). The long and intensive research period had a cathartic side effect. It served as a framework for the post-war generation in which they reflected on their own experiences. Those ranged from a gay history perspective (Keilson-Lauritz 2013), to a first critically distanced albeit empathic ego-document (Haverkorn 2013), the editing of source material (Bischoff 2017), to accounts of sexual abuse (Ligtvoet 2017). The biography of Mooij incorporated these accounts into the life story of Gisèle. The one-dimensional, heroic story, as it was told from within the Herengracht community before, had now grown into a multivocal complex of stories that ranged from heroic to traumatic.⁴ We started to realise that the

³ This struggle came with disputes, intrigues and schisms, but also, amongst others, a lawsuit of many years between the foundation *Castrum Peregrini* and the legal heir of Wolfgang Frommel, former director Manuel Goldschmidt and his legal heirs, the Wolf van Cassel Stichting about the archive that had been taken from the foundations premises as a reaction to the new direction.

⁴ The shocking accounts of sexual abuse triggered the constitution of an independent investigation commissioned by *Castrum Peregrini* and chaired by retired judge Frans Bauduin. It resulted in an extensive report published at <http://h401.org/wp-content/uploads/CASTRUMONDERZOEK.pdf>

materiality of the house as an archive represented the ambiguity of heroes, perpetrators and victims next to one another, sometimes even in personal union.⁵ This newly-discovered polyphony or even cacophony seemed to represent a *condition humaine* in all its consequences. It provided for a radically new and challenging frame for the cultural activities of H401.⁶

What we long to know: bridging the hermeneutic gap

Making the past relevant for today through creativity and fiction

The thematic approach of the H401 activities in the last ten years was distinctly interdisciplinary with a central role for artistic work rooted in the house as an archive. However, as this archive was staged and curated by its late inhabitants, to access the original meaning behind it, a certain knowledge of their lives and their times, a certain experience or a method of deconstruction was necessary.

Walter Benjamin wrote in *On the Concept of History* (Benjamin 1980): “Because the image of the past is lost in each new moment that does not recognize its presence as one of its own concerns.” In theology, this problem is addressed within the field of ‘hermeneutics’, a process of working out the meaning and significance of historic texts. In terms of the Bible, ‘hermeneutics’ usually refers to the way we read and ‘apply’ the biblical message to our modern situation, how we take an ancient text and hear what it is saying to us, here and now.

The ‘hermeneutical gap’ in a heritage situation refers to everything that separates us from understanding the meaning of a heritage object. Amongst the original users, authors or readers ‘there and then’ and us ‘here and now’, a gap has opened up that prevents us from understanding it like ‘there and then’ and also from applying it ‘here and now’. Unless we have the right set of ‘hermeneutical principles’ or scientific methods, we may find this gap rather difficult to bridge. We need to piece a puzzle of endless amounts of information to experience the world as it was back then. Unintentionally, Gisèle had touched upon hermeneutics when she noted in her diary:

“We all carry the Castrum story in us. It has settled in the corners of memory, taken various shapes that we bring to the surface from time to time, from this we can piece a puzzle. And then it will gain a face and others will look at it as one does at a portrait. But everyone will see something else” (Pigaht 2016).

Additionally, in the spirit of Benjamin, we could fail to see anything meaningful at all, other than an abstraction or an illusion as the understanding of an object from back then is fundamentally different today in the context of the world we live in. In addition to the time factor, there is, of course, also the gap between cultural realms. We may understand a bit of the problem with the simple image of a glass of water. In The Netherlands, its significance is fundamentally different than in the Sahara. The need for hermeneutics will be even more important in a combination of time and space distance.

Methodological foundations for hermeneutics of the arts have been provided by, amongst others, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) and Ernst Gombrich (1960). According to Gadamer, the understanding of an artwork depends on temporality, which also applies to human knowledge and experience. Gombrich similarly elaborates what is commonly expressed with ‘the eye of the beholder’, that only through our own life context and knowledge we can develop an understanding of what is in front of us. Contemporary art theory quite rightly claims to have overcome this binary model of truth and illusion, in the concept of artistic research as a ‘laboratory without a protocol’ (Slager 2015). The question, according to Slager (2015), is whether the artist as a researcher today can be a spectator of history, with his or her laboratories being archives, bridging the hermeneutic gap with artistic tools.

“Science is certainty, research is uncertainty. Science is supposed to be cold, straight and detached, research is warm, involving and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes, research fuels controversies by more controversies. Science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passions and emotions, research feeds on all those as so many handles to render familiar new objects of enquiry” (Latour 1998).

5 Gilad Hirschberger reminds us that “for members of perpetrator groups, collective trauma represents an identity threat (Branscombe et al. 1999), as it creates tension between the desire to view the group in a positive light (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and the acknowledgment of severe moral transgressions in its past. The inability to reconcile the character of the group in the present with its character in the past may motivate group members, primarily high identifiers, to perceive an historical discontinuity of the group that serves to distance present group members from past offenders (Roth et al. 2017). Sometimes, this discontinuity is reflected in the motivation to close the door on history and never look back (Imhoff et al. 2017). One of the 10 recommendations of the report of the Commission Bauduin was to clear the historic war-time apartment from the traces of Frommel so as to make a clear cut with the past. This would nevertheless have been exactly what Gilad describes as ‘closing the door on history’. On the contrary, we felt our responsibility to keep the door open and also make the negative aspects of the past part of our conversations today in order to hold the tension between positive and negative aspects of the past. As a personal note, I would add that growing up in Germany has made me aware that identification with the perpetrators – without any direct personal responsibility for the atrocities of the Nazis – brings a responsibility to remember as part of the ‘never again’ that formed our value system. I believe the same is valid for sites of memory, such as H401.

6 Please refer to Lars Ebert, <https://www.roots-routes.org/the-moralistic-turn-working-through-trauma-in-a-climate-of-outrage-the-case-study-of-castrum-peregrini-by-lars-ebert/>

To which Sarat Maharaj (2004) adds by describing the specificities of artistic research as “spasmic, interdisciplinary probes, haphazard cognitive investigations, dissipating interaction and imaginary archiving.” “That form of research cannot be channelled through rigid academic-scientific guidelines dealing with generalisation, duplication and quantification, since it engages in the unique, the qualitative, the particular and the local” (Slager 2015).

The ‘how’, or the method of the researching artist engaging in memory fabrics and archives, remains a matter of concern as the viewer demands accountability. Christopher Frayling (1997) notes that “artistic research does not begin with a predetermined set of questions or assumptions, but arises from the particular situations or contexts being investigated.” I would still argue that the awareness of a hermeneutic gap of our situation and ideological point of departure is often lacking, especially in the moral consensus of the contemporary art world. Looking at heritage with any kind of ideological or dogmatic perspective can be limiting, such as the one we see in the majority of, for instance, Documenta visitors. Art often is a self-directed appreciation of theory or cultural critique to confirm one’s own truth (Pfaller 2020). Their references (Butler, Deleuze etc.) underpin the politically correct message. As part of that system and a Documenta visitor myself, I do not write this without self-critique and the acknowledgement of the need for autonomous ethical thinking, instead of a moral compass that we seem to find in theory-based art. In its bold presence, one may easily overlook the investigative power of its counterpart, namely material-based art and fiction to bridge the hermeneutic gap. As an alternative concept to truth- and theory-based practices, artistic research that takes material, form and fiction seriously can offer truthfulness in creativity, if this creative research is truthful in the sense of being radical in its open-endedness and autonomy.

The allegorical impulse

Examples of the researching artist in the archive of H401

These developments of the last years have fuelled the impression, mainly in rich capitalist societies, that art is mainly about revealing often morally superior truth. Philosophers, such as Badiou, Derrida and Feyerabend, have characterised art as a practice of truth. However, art is also a practice of appearance, of fiction, deception and lie (Demeester 2018). Fiction is the centre of our human being. Without fiction, we cannot broaden our thinking

nor handle the complexity of our world. To put it in the famous words of Picasso: “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth” (Picasso 1923). Contemporary art practice often seems to forget that the one field fundamentally occupied by art is that of the appearance, the sparkle and that, without that sparkle, there is no truth (Pfaller 2020). The case studies of artistic works below support the thesis of Robert Pfaller (2020) that the material work of art (notwithstanding its conceptual backbones) is the only instrument of artists that makes it possible to discover something that they did not know or did not intend at the outset of the process of creative enquiry (Pfaller 2020). Cultural Studies and other fields of theory, as a point of departure for artistic research, on the other hand, hold the risk to produce art which merely illustrates what the artist and the viewer knew before they saw the artwork. It, therefore, broadens the hermeneutic gap.

When turning to fiction, material and form as an attempt to bridge the hermeneutic gap, the figure of the allegory comes to mind. The term, from Latin *allegoria*, is rooted in the Greek *ἀλληγορία*, composed of *ἄλλος*, ‘other’ and *ἀγορεύω* ‘to speak in the assembly, the *ἀγορά*’. It means speaking through others, letting others speak, putting the meaning-making outside of oneself. In the ancient world, it was a literary figure and a method of interpretation to bridge the hermeneutic gap. Allegorical reading would reveal a meaning of historic texts for a yet-to-come future. Arnisa Zeqo (2019) reminds us of the allegorical impulse embodied in certain practices of artists that problematise the activity of reference. In the hand of those artists, images become something ‘other’. Allegorist artists do not restore an original meaning; on the contrary, they make evident that there never was one. Meaning is added or altered in hindsight. This can be read in analogy to trauma following Ihab Saloul’s conceptualisation of the term as not the painful, horrific or stressful event as such that automatically turns into a traumatic experience. Only, a posteriori, a trauma develops due to the lack of meaning and the feeling of useless suffering or unexpected, unfair and ungrounded loss.⁷

The following artists have worked for a shorter or a longer period at H401 and have used its stories and its materiality as an archive. They made it productive through their artistic use of allegories or ‘research’ in the meaning described above to create a moment of truthfulness in which we can identify aspects of our own biography, our own longing, our own doubts and the urge to connect with the past as a compass for navigating our own lives.

7 The Viennese psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959): “[...] any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,” could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts [...] Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why—an aim—for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how [...]”. More commonly, trauma is seen to be caused by an event that breaks through our protective psychological shield, it overwhelms us and our ability to process its impression. See Ihab Saloul (2012, 30–35).

Amie Dicke

Amie Dicke's participation in the first exhibition at H401 (then still *Castrum Peregrini*), AURA, curated by Michiel van Iersel, marked the beginning of a six-year long artistic engagement with the stories and the material heritage at Herengracht 401. Dicke was fascinated by what disappeared through material decay, by that which is hidden in plain sight in interiors and archives or that which reveals itself through being erased by her own hands. Dicke herself used the term the 'unmade', which integrates two interconnected opposites and can be understood with the image of a palimpsest: by adding a layer, another one disappears, by erasing a layer an unexpected one appears (Dicke 2011).

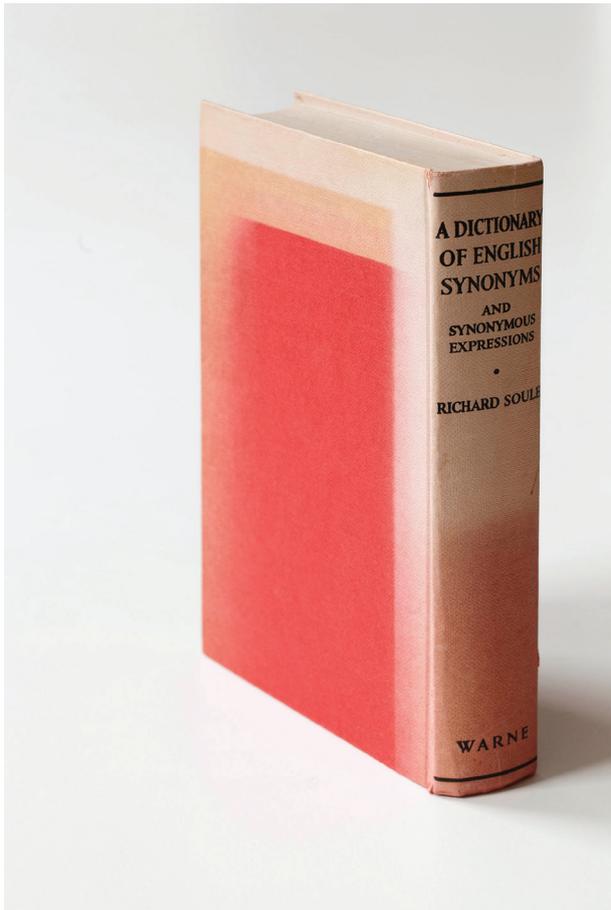


Figure 3. Amie Dicke from the series *Important Souvenirs*, 2016.

Her first work for the AURA exhibition was the site-specific *Claustrophobic*. The exhibition marked a *rite de passage* from the 'old' and inward-looking *Castrum Peregrini*, mainly publishing a magazine, to the newly-defined cultural activities that were directed towards the world. Van Iersel had asked a group of artists to reflect on what it means to transform a place into something new and whether the aura that was felt there would pertain

when 're-produced', with a reference to Walter Benjamin.⁸ Dicke was fascinated by the apartment in which, in 2008, Claus Victor Bock had died. The last Jewish survivor from the war-time period of *Castrum Peregrini* had come to live at Herengracht 401 again after retiring. Before the apartment was about to be dismantled, Dicke set out to cast a death mask over the interior before it disappeared and applied a layer of agricultural plastic over the furniture, covering and wrapping everything in the room. Only then was the apartment emptied and left a transparent plastic shape of what was no longer there, reflecting the essence or aura of a place, an 'unmade' space.

Later, Dicke investigated the former hiding apartment, which is until today largely unchanged from what it was during the years of occupation. With a reference to *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, she set out to realise a site-specific work with golden emergency blankets (Bachelard 1958). The last inhabitant of the apartment was Manuel Goldschmidt, the life-time companion of Frommel. Dicke started to wrap furniture, books and objects so as to save them, just like victims of an accident are saved by emergency blankets from the destructive influences of weather or environment. She soon undid this wrapping exercise as the 'poetics' of the space had helped her understand the actual possibility for her creative intervention, the cracks and the in-between spaces of the historic interior. There was no need for drawing attention to any kind of emergency or the decay, the threatening loss of matter. Instead, the overlooked little slots between carpet and wall, the cracks in the furniture and plaster of the ceiling, the worm holes in a table, those were the overlooked parts of the interior, maybe the ones that held the genuine being and uniqueness of the space. Dicke meticulously and with utter care filled those mostly tiny spaces with gold foil. Upon entering the apartment, nothing was visible. However, just like eyes have to adjust to darkness, they had to adjust to this subtle grid of golden fault lines that defined the space anew and showed the substance matter of overlooked absence.

In a third stage of Dicke's engagement with the house, she turned to the apartment and the studio of Gisèle. Supported by the Mondrian Fund, she worked there for a year. Like an archaeologist, she documented details of the interiors that revealed original colours, when, for instance, frames were removed from their place at the wall. Dust functioned like the colour of a silk print, revealing the artwork when the screen is taken off the paper. She collected images from the archive, by having them photographed in the same way she did with the material structures of the furniture, the curtains, tapestry, upholstery, books and the endless numbers of *objets trouvée*. Through this act of archiving archival material and rearranging it in her artwork, Dicke follows the above sketched allegorical impulse and turned these images into something 'other', exactly not to restore an original meaning, but from her

⁸ In his essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, first published in Paris 1936, Walter Benjamin argues that an artwork loses its aura once reproduced.

artistic perspective, to create meaning in hindsight. It is exactly in this act that fiction bridges the hermeneutic gap.

Another focus of this work is on the little notes that Gisèle had used more often as she grew older in order to compensate for the loss of her own memory and for labeling all kinds of objects, such as an empty video tape with the words “nothing to see here”. It is exactly where we commonly assume that nothing is to be seen that Dicke makes us see. She established a photographic account on a website and ultimately made a final selection for an art book, arranging her finds like an archiver, but using an ordering system that only reveals itself by engaging in its flow of images. Henk Slager writes about this approach:

“Against the Foucauldian perspective where a clear connection is made between an archiving rhetoric and the dispositive of power, artistic archiving adds the perspective of desirolgy: thinking in terms of new orders of affective associations, of fluid taxonomies and, above all, a thinking in terms of intellectual and artistic pleasure linked to derange the symbolic order” (Slager 2015).

In this dynamic, Dicke’s work could be seen as an ‘archivist of trauma’ like an ancient muse bringing forgetfulness by visualising the erasure of memory and, thereby, creating access to something that would have otherwise not been visible, namely new possibilities and meaning.

Ronit Porat

Ronit Porat engaged with the historic matter of the house on a longer term as well. First, during a residency in which she created new work for the H401 exhibition “*In Search*

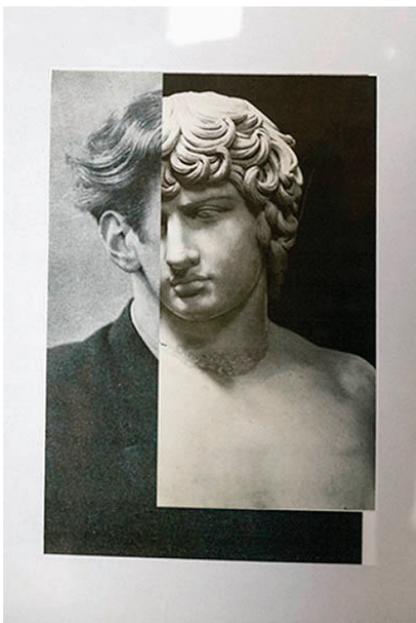


Figure 4. Ronit Porat from the series *In Search For Lost Time*, 2014.

of Lost Time”, curated by Ronit Eden in 2014 and later as a one-year resident of the Transhistorical Coalition. Porat is a photographer by training and a tireless autobiographer or rather an ‘auto-fiction-ist’. Porat grew up in a kibbutz in the north of Israel, did her military service and studied photography. She represents in all her being and work the ambiguities that come with such a background, combining deep affection for her home country with the critical reflection on its violence and exclusion, suffering herself from the isolation so many of her peers feel. Her upbringing in a kibbutz, including small traumatic anecdotes like an accident to her brother, returns in her work. More broadly, Porat is interested in biographies and histories that constitute collective identities. With her own radically independent life, she frees herself from those collectives that have deeply formed her and for which she still feels an empathic bond. In her work, she digs into archives, brings histories and biographies to the fore, but always inserts her own presence into them and, thereby, breaks the emptiness of the photographic documentation with counter images, creating collages that air an absurdist or surreal quality. Porat’s work responds to Benjamin’s problem of the ‘aura of an artwork in times of technical reproduction’ by inserting the aura from her own genuine story, her own worries, sorrows, pains, joys and her own fantasy in the aura-less material of archival material whose truthfulness is unreachable, cut off by the hermeneutic gap.

During her residency at H401, she dug deeply into the histories of the hidden war-time community and into the books of Frommel and photographs from the archive, as if to free some of the biographies from the corset of the heroic narrative that Frommel and his circle assigned to them posthumously. Derrida, in his book *Archive Fever*, showed that archives represent an intrinsic link between narrative and power. The word archive comes from *Arkheion*, the seat of the rulers in ancient Athens and it is this residence of the powerful where also documents were stored (Derrida 1995). This archive preserved the stories of the winners and made these stories a historical reality or scientific truth. Where Herengracht 401, as an archive, preserved the truth of Frommel and his disciples Porat intuitively focused, amongst others, on Liselotte von Gandersheim, who drowned in the North Sea just after the war had ended and Vincent Weyand, who died in Buchenwald. She liberated them from the corset of a hero by taking their tragic, their vulnerability and their human smallness seriously. The collages that she produced were put into a spatial arrangement with one another in combination with objects from the archive, text-fragments from Frommel’s library and some handwritten reflections of Porat that connected them to her own life-experience (Porat 2014). In her artistic approach, Porat achieves a twofold effect: by bringing to the surface the unacknowledged and, so far, hidden stories, Porat shows us the core of an archive and, therefore, any form of history writing which Hal Foster (2004) describes as “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private”. Porat does this by putting them in another context, juxtaposing

them with her own biography and, therefore, highlighting their otherness. At the same time, through this allegorical use of historic material, Porat offers the viewer an access through her own life story which she tells first hand. The gap between then and now is narrowed through our encounter with Porat herself.

Renée Turner

The Rotterdam based artist, teacher and researcher, Renée Turner, has developed a collaborative practice since her time in the cross-disciplinary art collective Geuzen. In her work at H401, she combines various visual forms of research with online writing to explore female identity, narratives of the archive, media ecologies and spaces of co-learning. The *Warp and Weft of Memory* maps the wardrobe of Gisèle d'Ailly van Waterschoot van der Gracht, as the most intimate remains of her as a person, that which was literally closest to her very being, her skin and body (Turner 2017). Fashion is treated as the medium, which situated Gisèle in the world. Turner developed a digital archive of Gisèle's wardrobe as a means to reflect on her life, work and various histories. She bridges the hermeneutic gap by setting up an alternative archive.

The web-based archive has various entry points. Turner's own notes offer a very personal view on the artist's encounter with a person she meets only through her closet



Figure 5. Renée Turner at work for *The Warp And Weft of Memory*.

(Turner 2017). The 'Semantic Tapestry' offers an archive of photographs sorted in interrelated taxonomies that provide an order and, at the same time, a possibility to get lost and wander around. In the 'Epistolary Section', Turner provides access to two of her own correspondences with a writer and a scholar, as well as a letter to the late Gisèle.

Turner's own twofold background provides for a unique artistic profile, the practical impulse of putting things in order stemming from her own roots in the DIY movement. Her academic grounding in a theoretic discourse makes her seek references of critical reflection and, therefore, participation in a broader discourse. The latter translates in her pedagogic endeavours of creating spaces of dialogues for students, artists and scholars. A main tool for her research of Gisèle's wardrobe, consequently, were conversations with students in situ. Those who knew Gisèle would testify that she was driven by an intense urge for order. She explained this through her childhood experience of helping her uncle in the family archive. Throughout her life, she meticulously archived everything her life produced. Turner's work can be read as a poetic and yet, scholarly attempt to pay tribute to this life endeavour. Yet, the methodological rigour of Turner's approach is motivated by artistic experiment, establishing connections with her 'Semantic Tapestry' and associative connections in her 'Notes', both creating rhizomatic assemblages bringing together also the seemingly unrelated. Turner's view that "An archivist's work inevitably ends without a sense of closure" may have been true also for Gisèle's work and it may even be true for us trying to understand her life. We are left without a sense of closure. However, this open-endedness is the strength of the poetic aspect of artistic research work. Turner's fictional letter to Gisèle ends with the following sentence.

"You left a tag on a pair of pants which read: 'These pants are good, but too short.' They were listed in one of your 'To repair' inventories. Just to let you know, I took them home, let the hem out by a centimetre and a half and then returned them to your closet. Judging by the length of the rest of your trousers, I think they would now fit" (Turner 2017).

This shows, maybe in the most concrete way, how artistic research practices can bring an incomprehensible past closer to our living reality. Turner literally follows up the conversation, the to-do lists and the urges for order of the deceased historic person. Her material research object, Gisèle's wardrobe turns into an allegory to trigger thoughts from the historic material into the intellectual setting of Turner's work.

Conclusions

The one-dimensional, heroic story of *Castrum Peregrini* was an illusion. Its historic protagonists had consciously or subconsciously sublimated trauma in self-fabricated

meaning and a cultic fundament of togetherness and belonging. The traces of their lives have led to a staged or curated archive that is more an artwork in itself than an objective source of history. As with ancient texts, a hermeneutic gap prevents us from deriving meaning from it today in an unmediated way.

We saw that artistic research may offer a mode of access, a mediation that allows us to unravel relevance and meaning for a contemporary audience. We looked at two modes of practice, based artistic research, the theory- and content-driven practice that results in concepts and the material- and form-driven practice that results in fiction. The latter holds the potential to bridge the hermeneutic gap, the distance between the viewer and the historic object that makes its understanding so difficult and may otherwise require complex scholarly approaches to fully comprehend. Memory work and more generally history, is a contested field of meaning making for today's societies at large and institutions like H401, in particular. Fiction-based art and form-based art that investigate historic objects and narratives build bridges to an unexpected dimension of history and offer a potential for identification, not so much through a theory-based truth, but rather by building a moment of truthfulness. Instead of creating any kind of security of belonging that archives structured by power seem to provide, the approach of fiction and the unstable matter of artistic enquiry offers a moment in which we can relate to something otherwise incomprehensible like trauma or to anything 'other' as such. Ideally, the artworks enable us to recognise the otherness in ourselves.

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