

# Collections and collecting

## The dead do not count

### The personal press archive of Ria Verhaeghe

For over a decade Ria Verhaeghe (Roeselaere, 1950) has been filing press photos. From the gathered weekly national and international papers and magazines she chooses photos to be cut into pieces, which are then glued into self-made booklets with a cover showing exchange rates. Meanwhile her personal media image archive has taken up about ten meters on the book shelf.

According to the writer Georges Perec each library does not only fulfil a double need, but also a double obsession: 'the wish to keep certain things and order them in a certain way'. Also Ria Verhaeghe's collecting passion seems to come from her desire to keep what will be "already rehash" the next day – this is the fate of most images of the actuality –, and the manic attempt to classify with the hope to control the uncontrollable telex messages of press agencies in this world, filtered by newspapers and magazines and handed to us on a daily basis. The press image loses information and news value by isolating it from the context, in which it has been published and by separating it from the caption it often gains ambiguity and expressivity. The scissors of Verhaeghe moreover do not respect the frame of the detected picture, but they reframe and fragment the picture. The detail fascinates her, not the composition. Everyone who thumbs through her booklets is confronted with a completely different way of looking at the images familiar to us, and with other 'classifications' as those used by the modal newspaper reader or photo scientist.

The archiving of Verhaeghe results in an alternative typology of press images, based on all kinds of associative correlations. She uses colour codes and keywords to reorganise and link the images found, as for instance the terms 'Icarus', 'verticals' (dead), 'WWEB' (*woman with empty baskets*), 'glenden' (random double images), and 'emballage' (packaging). These keywords already show how she looks beyond the documentary content of the press image and how she is rather moved by the similarities of form or motive, and by the 'iconic' power of an image, that refers to ancient character presentations of mythical images. This does not mean that Ria Verhaeghe's classification offers a rational analysis of the mass medium, on the contrary: her archiving activities

stay hermetic, private, hybrid and naïve, although a divided context of the collective memory is often the starting point.

Verhaeghe keeps a sort of bookkeeping – she stamps the photos day by day, counts them per month, draws graphics and matrixes in yearbooks and makes deductions from her ‘statistics’. In this way she questions the ‘statistic’ fact, showing that certain types of images are more present in the media during a certain period of time than others. Those listings and inventories express the urge to make the visible invisible, to reduce the contingent being intrinsic to the photographic image to the abstract matter containing mathematical and graphic visualisations. Her comparative view on similar and contrasting images in this way is mainly turned into decoding the underlying visual codes, intrinsic to press images and tracing repetitions and patterns in the construction of an ever changing ‘portrait of an era’. Her classification is far from being scientific, but it has its own obsessive precision. Her bookkeeping displays the irrational stock exchange rate of the portions of newspaper pictures, quickly consumed by us every day.

Of course her classifications lead only to more chaos, further subdivisions and potential relations. Still, Verhaeghe uses her collection of news paper images as an archive of material and a sketch book, from which numerous autonomous collages, as well as videos and paintings arise.

Ria Verhaeghe chooses and processes photographs from the *lifestyle*-column as well as from political news, from advertisements and the concert report, but mainly the scrapbooks and collages with the ‘verticals’ stay in my memory; it is Verhaeghe’s personal interpretation – as it seems – of the late Susan Sontags device ‘Regarding the Pain of Others’ (2003). The most important aspect here is the attempt to create a relation as an individual with the images of the dead, that only existed because of the press coverage by professional – and mostly anonymous – press photographers of armed conflicts, murders, accidents and disasters. Exactly these images, most literally clinging to the gruesome realism, get a second life with Verhaeghe. Here the beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder and the quality of looking lifts those photographs beyond the shocking effect and saves them from being forgotten.

By moving these pictures to another carrier and giving them another destination – from the news paper towards the archive and further to the artistic field – and by cutting and reassembling these pictures in combination with others, these helpless bodies lose their anonymity, necessary to support the news coverage and they regain something from their individuality and from an irreducible presence. Or according to the argument of Geoffrey Batchen somewhere else in this article as a result of the exposition ‘Forget me not’ the photo only functions as ‘memento mori’ when it is transformed, by for instance touching it, giving it a title, manipulating and gluing something to it. In short, let us say that the

image is linked to the personal memory, whereby the released intimate and collective feelings are taken notice of.

As this aspect of her work touches me most, I cannot help but see Ria Verhaeghe as a female 'Atlas'-figure, operating in the margin of the world of photography and art, appropriating the official image of an era in an orthodox way, carrying the events of the world, keeping the images and making a report of them, and thus offering a safe place to all those abandoned and forgotten photographed victims of the history.

I can also identify with the saying of Régis Durand about that other giant of a photograph collector, Hans-Peter Feldmann, whose work has been called a 'crypt', in which numerous poor photo documents get a place piece by piece, or 'a tomb of anonymous pictures'.

It is rather the tomb than the pictures, which I find interesting, the self assigned task to build a tomb in memory of all those unnoticed dead out there and of those undoubtedly dead inside.' (Hans-Peter Feldman, '272 pages' 2002)

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