

Alternate Voices: Pages

Panel Discussion

16 December 2017

16:00 - 17:30

Scheryn Collection Arena, Level 0
Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA)

Panelists:

Babak Afrassiabi

Tazneem Wentzel

Ashley Walters

Sven Christian (moderator)

Sven Christian (SC): Hi everyone, thanks very much for taking the time out of your weekend to come and listen to what will no doubt be a really interesting discussion. My name is Sven Christian, and I'm the Adrienne Iann Assistant Curator of Books and Works on Paper at Zeitz MOCAA. It is a great honour and privilege to have with us today Babak Afrassiabi, Tazneem Wentzel, and Ashley Walters, who are here to talk about the wonderful work that they're doing. As I'm sure you're all aware, this discussion will focus on the question of whether or not art can rely on the archive as a historical premise, and is the second panel that forms part of a larger supplementary programme, running in conjunction with the exhibition of *Publishing Against the Grain* at Zeitz MOCAA (18 November 2017 - 29 January 2018).

Alternate Voices is a programme aimed at providing visitors with a first-hand account into the origins, thought processes, and concerns behind some of the key contributions to the exhibition, in this case *Pages*, providing a platform for these ideas to be expanded upon within the context of artistic and critical production in South Africa.

Publishing Against the Grain is an exhibition organised and produced by Independent Curators International (ICI), New York, and initiated by ICI's Alaina Claire Feldman, Becky Nahom and Sanna Almajedi. The exhibition was made possible with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, ICI's Board of Trustees and International Forum. The presentation of this exhibition at Zeitz MOCAA has been made possible by the American Friends of Zeitz MOCAA, the Zeitz MOCAA Exhibition Endowment Fund, and Zeitz MOCAA members. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank the rest of the curatorial team, the registrar department, those in communication and everyone else involved, most notably the speakers, for your continued support and for taking the time out to be with us today.

Joining us from the Netherlands is **Babak Afrassiabi**, who is one of the founders of *Pages*, a bilingual Farsi and English artist magazine with nine issues since its inception. *Pages* is published sporadically in the Netherlands and its content – produced partly in Iran and partly in the Netherlands, and always collaboratively through long-term engagements with other contributors – always expands from the artist's own practice. As an independent publication, it provides a platform through which interconnected topics can be explored outside the mainstream, market-oriented network of the art world. The editorial approach follows an interest in unresolved narrations of history, culture and the geo-political, and the ways they condition contemporary notions of artistic practice, with a recurring concern of the relationship between contemporary art and the archive.

Tazneem Wentzel is currently a fellow at the Centre for Humanities Research at UWC, completing an MA in History, and a member of the Burning Museum, a collaborative interdisciplinary collective rooted in Cape Town, South Africa. To quote from their website, "The space which we find ourselves in is one which has been scarred and seared by a historical trajectory of violent exclusions and silences. These histories form the foundation of an elusive and at times omnipotent

democracy that occasionally reveals its muscle in the form of laws and by-laws in public space. It is from this historical climate and present context that the work of the Burning Museum engages with themes such as history, identity, space, and structures. We are interested in the seen and unseen, the stories that linger as ghosts on gentrified street corners; in opening up and re-imagining space as potential avenues into the layers of history that are buried within, under, and between.”

In addition to her collective practice, Tazneem Wentzel’s research interests focus on food as an archival repository that is practised and consumed. The archive, its ephemerality and its tangibility has a been recurring theme in the work that she has been involved in, ranging from public art to the chemical processes of conservation.

Ashley Walters was born in Cape Town in 1983. He completed his BAFA in 2011 and obtained a Masters in Fine Art at the University of Cape Town in 2013, where he was the recipient of a number of prestigious awards and scholarships, including the Michealis Prize and the Tierney Fellowship Award. Subsequent to this he completed an exchange at Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig (2013), and was awarded an Apexart Fellowship in New York in 2015. Commissioned by Magnum Foundation his work has been featured widely in publications such as Laying Foundations for Change, Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities, and Aperture magazine: Platform Africa, Summer 2017 edition (#227). Ashley has also taken part in a number of international exhibitions in Bamako, London, Germany, New York, and exhibited his photographs widely within South Africa.

Ashley Walters’ work protagonise a subjective and critical approach to the behaviours and processes of urban life in the city and its periphery. His work tells of an interest in the everyday and public space in its least predictable dimension. Waivering between absolute complicity with his subjects and distant observation, his photography emphasises a non-spectacular representation of reality. Whereas some images provide tableaux of intimate, inhabited spaces, others render non-territories that bespeak of up-rootedness, scarring, anxiety and liminality.

As I’m sure you’re aware, today is the Day of Reconciliation, an opportunity for us to remember and come to terms with our troubled past, one that is filled with the trauma of displacement, dehumanisation, oppression, and guilt. When we think about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established after the abolition of apartheid in 1994 whose mandate was to bear witness to, record, and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations, we can begin to recognise the significance of the archive, not only as a site for reconciliation, but as a crucial repository to account for the intentionally silencing and subsequent erasure of voices, and as a site through which to resuscitate collective memory and healing.

To paraphrase Saleh Najafi’s paper in *Pages*, entitled ‘Hope Against Hope:’ “Trauma (or more precisely the traumatic core of every event) is exactly what one is unable to remember and, as Freud has demonstrated, is nevertheless condemned to repeat. That is, one is condemned to repeat the inability to recollect, to make the unmemorable a part of one’s symbolic narrative. It is this inability to remember what is lost, and more specifically, “to redeem the potentials and hopes of the past, the lost causes and failures within all the past processes of emancipation” that we are hear to talk about today.

Opening up the discussion to the panelists, Babak, if you could please talk us through the origins of your work, and the motivation behind *Pages*?

Babak Afrassiabi (BA): First of all thank you for inviting me to be a part of this panel. As you said, the magazine is directly connected to our artistic practices, and indirectly informs the themes of the issues that we work on. The issue that you were quoting from, *When Historical*, was actually a direct consequence of the research that we were doing for a project. It was also very much informed by the political situation and the protests in Iran at the time. The article that you were

quoting from by Saleh Najafi was written as a response to that. He goes back to reflecting on the Iranian revolution from 1979, and also Foucault's reading and projection onto that revolution.

We began *Pages* as a platform, first for ourselves to create a space for collaborative research, a platform where research can be conducted parallel to our work. We wanted to create a space that was independent from the spaces of contemporary art that we are working in as artists. Because it is a bilingual magazine, it is also a kind of liminal space, functioning between languages, between spaces. In that sense it has been very important for us to generate work in collaboration with people in order to instigate other ways of thinking about practices, histories, language, and so on.

SC: Tazneem and Ashley, your work is also largely research based. How did you begin working with the archive and how has that influenced your practice?

Tazneem Wentzel (TW): I've always worked with the archive. Even as a child, the family pictures, portraits, and photographs underneath your bed or parents cupboard — those are archives that I would always go back to look at. That was my first entry into history. At the moment I've been lucky enough to have met a lot of wonderful people along the way who've shared an interest in history from very different backgrounds and disciplines. They too have shaped the way I approach historical objects. My background is in anthropology and history. I had no visual inclinations, but have learnt that through working with Burning Museum. The way I approach research has largely been influenced by the people I work with.

What I've learned through my experiences at the District Six Museum—and other museums—is that you have to accept that there is a gap within the archive. You will never know everything. How do you work within that gap? Where can you look to find remnants of your historical background? Food has become one of those avenues for me. Particularly fast food. It's a social thing. It brings people together. Looking at the history of the very ordinary is where I find myself at the moment.

Ashley Walters (AW): I'm a visual artist. I work predominantly with photography, video, and sculpture. I think my practice also started from a gap in the archive; looking at my own home, where I grew up, the community itself, and the people that live there. There is very little access to information about these spaces. Where did they come from? Why is it that I live here and not near the mountain? Why is the community designed in a certain way?

The projects that I've worked on are often done over long periods of time, from a year to two years each. Doing research and not being able to find historical or archival information on these communities made me aware that there are huge gaps. Some of that information doesn't exist. Perhaps it was destroyed. There are many archives that are not taken care of—physical archives, printed documentation—that haven't been taken care of.

I'm not a documentary photographer, but I'm making work around my personal experience of communities. I work in a place for a couple years, go back, see change, and then show that change, based on my experience. I'm showing things that happen in communities that people who live outside these communities don't often have access to. I'm showing it in other communities.

To date I've done work in Uitsig, which is where I grew up. I've done work in Woodstock too (which will be published soon). Making work in areas that I have lived in makes sense because I have personal experiences within that community and can respond. So the work is partly documentation, but it's also my experience — it can therefore exist in other forms like sculpture, installation, and video.

SC: There is a lot of subjectivity that comes into the way we frame things. If we take it back to the publication of *Pages*, for example, each iteration has a different theme. Today we've spoken largely about *When Historical*, which is the eighth issue, but Babak perhaps you could tell us more about the themes you choose, why you choose them, and how you select your writers?

BA: Another of the issues, *Seep*, was actually produced parallel to the project with the same title. It is a project that we were working on that speaks very directly to two existing archives. One of these was the archive of British Petroleum (BP). This archive shows documentation of when oil was first found in the Middle East by this British oil company. At the time it was called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The other archive was the collection of western modern art in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

The BP archive is the largest existing archive of modernisation in that region of the country. The whole process of excavation, the modernisation of that region, and the building of the city is very meticulously documented, but it was also partly fictional. It was documenting a narrative that was, like many colonial archives, not presenting the full story. At one point, we realised that the gaps themselves told a lot of stories.

When you look at how archives are generally produced, what is often missing is the labour behind them. In this case it was the factory worker; the labour that facilitated the production of oil but also the production of the archive. In 1953 the company had to evacuate the country because of the nationalisation of oil. A few years prior to that they started to create a large amount of photographs, documenting the facilities of the factories, the schools, and the one university that they had built in South-Western Iran. They also documented the workers and students who were learning the trade of oil excavation and would end up working in the factories. Those photographs were often very staged. They represented an almost fictional narrative about the region.

This is a story that never ended. Although the factory finally had to be closed down, the story of that archive continued into the collection of western modern art at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. It continued that whole process of modernisation right through to 1978. At the time the government had built the first museum of contemporary art in Iran and had acquired what was, at the time, the largest collection of Western art outside of Europe, the majority of which is American modern art, from Jackson Pollock to Andy Warhol.

After the revolution of 1979 the whole collection was taken down into the cellar and wasn't allowed to be exhibited for the next twenty years, because it was considered to represent so called western ideology. In both the project and the magazine we connect these two stories. Looking at the connections between the BP archive and the collection, particularly their misrepresentation of the historical context, is a way for us to look towards another narrative of modernity, or another narrative of the experience of modernity in Iran. We consider the collection becoming contemporary only after it was withdrawn and not exhibited; in its absence. The archive actually becomes associated with the historical context by being closed off or taken away.

Official archives are often produced around material manipulations. In this case the manipulation of raw petroleum instigated the archive. So it is through an understanding of these material manipulations that archives are also connected to geographies, and to ecologies. This is an interesting element that was at the core of *Seep*.

SC: Archives are inevitably select. The testaments in the bible act as a kind of archive. On a global level, social media channels like Facebook and the data that is being collected and sold reminds us that archives often function within political spheres. In each of your practices, you've managed to negotiate an archive that in many ways is living — it's activated through your practice. Tazneem perhaps you could talk us through the politics of archiving in relation to your own work?

TW: The politics of archiving in South Africa is complex. People of colour in South Africa were categorised out of that history. Your representation in the museum is in the form of a diorama. Even if you look at what gets the privilege of being archived and stored, there is an unequal distribution of which histories are important enough to be housed within an air-conditioned institution. Then there are other archives that refuse to be housed in storerooms — archives that people live and practice every day. On the one hand our collections have been historically skewed toward the colonial/apartheid archive. The one thing the colonisers did well is that they documented their

colonisation very well. You have these archives of oppression, but how do you engage with them? It's interesting to look at these archives now, as well as alternative archives, and see how they do or don't speak to each other.

SC: In an interview with the US based media historian Norman Klein, published in the issue *When Historical*, you write that "the archives of our time have become sites for re-archiving and of reproducing documents. For example, electronic archives such as Youtube or Facebook, where a single document is posted and reposted time and again through a process of cut-and-paste. If archives are incomplete, it is no longer because of the documents that did not survive the passing of time, but of what is still to be inserted or re-invented into them." What effect do you think this kind of flexibility will have on the importance of the archive going forward? How do we begin to draw meaning from something that appears to have no centre?

BA: Ten years ago, and still today, there was this discussion going around that archives need to be centralised. Capitalism is investing in these central structures. Every month we see museums and libraries putting their material online. You hear big headlines of maps or whole museum collections being digitised and made available online. The more accessible they become online, the more they lose their connection with history. The historical connotations that these objects might have had at one point become an actualisation of data; information that is consumable, like any other object.

We basically cut, paste, and repost them. What is always missing from these archives is the historical labour that goes into producing them, whether it be through colonisation or any other kind of labour. Perhaps what is important is to think about these archives in relation to location. To go back to the project *Seep*, what was interesting was going to the actual location of where these archives were produced. Often the archives that are housed in libraries or institutions have a location elsewhere. The actual location where the archive was produced has gone through a totally different historical and political trajectory to the one it is housed in.

For *Seep* we were travelling to the sites of production, and of course a lot has changed. South-West Iran has experienced many phases of war. Many historical sites are returning to a time before oil was found. If you think about it, archives are never really a closed space. Whether you like it or not, they have these relationships with these places, with these other histories. It is important that these are re-channeled back into the archive so that it becomes more permeable, more porous. It's only then that we can begin to think about the archive as a site for political struggle or negotiation.

SC: In that same interview Klein writes that in fiction, "Back story is essential to the ambience of reading. It is the unspoken that came before... In tragedies set in post-war situations, like the women of Troy (Euripides), the characters reenact the unspoken, the lost decade when war stole their lives. But they must reenact the unspoken within a single day. They are essentially archiving dramatically. They are forced to condense meaning, one might say, only enough memory to keep the ghost of their dead husbands alive, but not too much to bear. They must archive selectively." I think here about the work that both Tazneem and Ashley have done, both within the gallery or museum context, as well as in the public domain. How have people responded to works that you've displayed publicly, especially those that aren't familiar with your work? Do you think there is some kind of innate, collective understanding - do people get it automatically?

AW: To respond to both what you're saying now, and the question about the digitisation of the archive; where archives are going, the question of access... On the one hand archives are being seen, which is a good thing. It instigates a bigger audience that can then go back to the physical archive. Looking at archives that are very specific, whether through location, history, or its material value, like oil, geography, or development; often these archives are not accessible to the public. Often it comes down to money, because it costs a lot to have a well controlled environment where you can keep printed material, documentation, where otherwise archives are poorly maintained. My own practice is often centred around a specific location. I photograph and make work that is exhibited in a gallery space, which is accessible to a specific audience, but I'm also making work that is accessible to the general public.

We once had a group exhibition in a train station, where lots of commuters travel on a daily basis. When you start having conversations around the work there is a different appreciation for the image. In a gallery you say 'this is an artwork'. The moment you put it in the public it's a completely different thing. The one day I was standing next to one of my works. I had a conversation with some of the commuters, and they were trying to figure out what they were looking at. They're familiar with the image because it is a space that they themselves have seen, they live nearby, but what is the point of it? Is it advertising?

On social media everyone has a personal archive of their entire history. The moment you join Facebook, information about where you live, what you do on a daily basis, your interests, where you spend; those platforms are all interconnected. That is an archive. You're documenting something that becomes a database, becomes information, becomes commodity.

It's becoming more difficult to take care of physical archives. We don't have the conditions to do that. Even with digital, it's the same. If you copy a digital file again and again and again it deteriorates. It's just the nature of the platforms that we are using. If I compare the photographs I took years ago to the ones I took recently, those raw files to the files that I'm producing now, irrespective of the device or camera that I'm using, there's a huge gap between the copy and the source material. That's the nature of technology. You have to copy it onto new devices because they become obsolete. You have floppy disks, CDs, flash storage, but at some point your computers are all going to deteriorate or break. You need the physical material prints too. You need to think ahead.

TW: We've had a number of interesting interactions in public space. I prefer to work there. It's a much more interesting context. In much of our work as Burning Museum, the archive relates directly to the place. The imagery that we used previously was from the [Vankalka](#) archive in [Greschop](#). People wanted to have their portrait taken, and the Greschop is in District Six, so when we put it up there people generally recognise it, it's familiar to them. I also find the texture of public wall space a lot more interesting than the gallery space. You have to add a lot to make it speak to an audience that doesn't necessarily understand its attachment to particular archives. In public spaces closer to District Six and Woodstock, the portraits that we use make a lot more sense. When you put up a portrait or a landscape from District Six, near to District Six, there is a lot of nostalgia and familiarity. People know those places. For me it's almost like authoring public space, puncturing it with little memories to catch people's attention, even if it's just for a second. It's a reminder that you do belong in this place, that you do have a history. Even if it's not portrayed in institutions, even if it's out of history, even if it's just for two days — you do belong here. We're trying to figure out our relationship with place and why we are on the periphery. I guess it's that longing to be closer to the mountain, this mother city.

SC: I wanted to ask, because you mentioned something that relates to what Ashley was saying about technology and the archive always being in a constant state of renewal, if you could tell us more about your current research at UWC?

TW: For my masters I have to write a thesis, and I had no idea what I was going to do. I wasn't going to write about something that I had no emotional attachment to. Through my courses I started thinking about where else I could look for an archive, places of history. With Burning Museum we had already been looking under the cupboard, on top of it, along the train lines, in museums... I figured it was time to start looking in the kitchen. I realised that I grew up with these things, I've been surrounded by them. Sometimes it's so obvious, so normal to you that you miss them. So I started thinking about food within a South African context, bread specifically. That's my masters at the moment — bread, gatsbys...

SC: To go back to that interview again, there's a part where Norman Klein writes that with official records, "We are given a construction, but allowed to also see the bones of the house. As one researches through a collection, a database, there is always a haunted ideology, of course. What is

left out tells us more than what is included. No matter how complete the archive may seem, it is partial. It may seem thorough, but that may be in order to hide something more important. Rarely does a researcher find the heart of a matter in a collection. More likely, the heart has been consumed or partially removed. Otherwise, the collection would not have survived. It is like a plate of food after it has been eaten. We study the plate for signs of what was eaten.” On a very literal level I read that and began thinking about your practice, the archive as a verb, something that can be consumed and digested. Which brings us back to the conversation about trauma and the archive as a place for hope, desire...

AW: Often documentation is subjective. When you merge all these archives together to become a database you sometimes lose that subjectivity, that sense of creativity, the materiality of physical archives. The challenge is then looking at how you can go back, how you can sift through all this data and allow us to go back to these archives.

TW: I don't know if this is a good example, but around the 50s, 60s, and 70s you'd see the manipulation of recipe books written by predominantly white Afrikaners. These recipes were largely Cape Malay recipes that these authors had gone and 'collected' from cooks in Cape Town. These books are now in our libraries, but the recipe itself... These women would deliberately give incorrect portions of spices or leave out important flavours that make or break the dish. So within food there are also ways that we've subverted the dominant impulse to collect, to document. You won't find that recipe there. You have to go find it somewhere else, you have to go taste, experience some of the dishes and how people make them to find the actual recipe. So people have been subverting through food for a long time. It's just that sometimes we forget how to read. You forget that eating is another form of reading history.

Audience Q&A:

Audience: I have a question regarding institutional archives and something that happened at Stellenbosch last year. During the student protests I was working at the library and they closed it off because of the protests. I remember some of the students shouting "We want to burn the Afrikaner section of the university's library". That is the archival section, where the first editions of certain laws are kept in air-tight conditions. I said to the students, "I think you should reconsider your protest action, because you're burning the ammunition with which you want to decolonise the university — this is where everything lies that you're fighting against". But they don't have access to it. It's hidden away. This whole thing about when you digitise an archive you lose this connection to history, or the historical connection... Maybe this is a common question, it's just that there is this stark disparity between what the students have access to and what they should have access to, and the knowledge that they have of this very important archive, this distance between students and the colonial archive...

TW: I've been in that section of Stellenbosch library, and you know, people are angry. They have every right to be. But when I say burn the archive, there are different ways of burning. I'm talking about ideologically burning an archive. Because in the long run that's a lot more disruptive than just burning something. The bottom line is that this is what we have — so I'm not going to agree with the diorama of bones still being kept in museums, but it's a challenge that we need to think about creatively. We need to re-imagine how we can engage with our history on our own terms. I don't think it's productive to burn books. I've said this before; if you want to burn it, rather sell it so that you can get money and do something else with it.

SC: Babak from your knowledge of the revolution in Iran, have there been similar incidents? I went to an exhibition opening at Goodman Gallery (Cape Town) a while back by Samson Kambalu. He was giving a walkabout, and one of the things that he said was that when it comes to decolonisation, it's important to think about what kind of future we have in mind post-decolonisation. Can you give us your thoughts on this in relation to the Iranian revolution?

BA: One of the problems around the protest was that the existing archives are directly linked to colonialism. As we understand it, an archive is a product of the western imagination, something that is produced parallel to the history of colonisation. The problem is that they're seen as the only valuable and genuine entry or material that links us to history. But the important thing is to look at it as a political study and the possibility of linking that history to a critical, ideal future. In Saleh Najafi's 'Hope Against Hope' he talks about investing the archive with other desires, other than the kind of desires that initially generated those archives. Maybe this is what Tazneem was saying— that there are other ways of burning an archive. Even the idea of burning comes out of a desire for difference. It's about re-channelling that desire for a different future. It means connecting that colonial past first to the present. Those archives exist, we are living with them, so it's not only a channel that links us to the past but also to the future.

It's also important in this discussion of the archive as a political study to think about how our relationship with archives is changing. We as humans are becoming redundant to the archive. Ashley was saying at one point that the mediums for archiving are becoming obsolete, but I think what is also happening is that we as subjects are becoming redundant, we are becoming obsolete to the archive. I'm bringing this up as a kind of political question, but maybe it's important when we think about archives to think about how they function beyond us; how more and more they are existing and accumulating outside of us. Our role is becoming more and more passive in the sense that we are simply recirculating this material and accumulating more and more of, to circulate data, to circulate value, basically. This is a relationship with archives that is important to think about. How are we going to deal with this?

This is a new form of colonisation. Colonisation did not only happen in the 19th century, it is still happening, and if we want to talk about these archives that link us to history we should think within our current context and how we relate to archives.