

RESHAPING THE REAL

Displacement Strategies in the work of Laurence Aëgerter

- Renée Borgonjen

*The archive is the site where past and future become reversible.
(Boris Groys)*

ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS OF 'THE' REAL

In her work Laurence Aëgerter investigates strategies to give new meaning to existing images using both historical and contemporary sources from our shared 'memory bank'. Through her interaction with the material, she intervenes in the identity of her subjects.

Her interventions challenge the traditional reading of a range of sources, such as encyclopaedias, documentary photographs and art reproductions. Existing images regain urgency as they come alive in a new context. Although Aëgerter uses various media and materials, photography prevails, while installations and artists' book are also part of her artistic vocabulary.

How does one relate to the reality that surrounds us – or rather, realities, because they are not unambiguous – and the tradition in which one stands as an artist? Aëgerter, who was not only trained as a visual artist at the Rietveld Academy but also as an art historian at the VU University Amsterdam, is acutely aware of these several positions.

DISPLACEMENT AND TRANSLATION

To explain the meaning of the displacement strategies in Aëgerter's work, I explored the points of agreement between her work and two of Nicolas Bourriaud's concepts, i.e. 'the radican't and 'precarious constructions'.

Bourriaud claims that modern people, like ivy, can become rooted anywhere. Ivy belongs to the botanical family of the radicans. We no longer feel a deep-rooted attachment to one specific place but we are at home everywhere and we can temporarily settle anywhere.¹ In *The Radicant*, Bourriaud presents the artist as the prototype of the contemporary traveller who experiences, like none other, what it means to pass through various systems of signs and formats. Such transits are an integral part of mobility and displacement.²

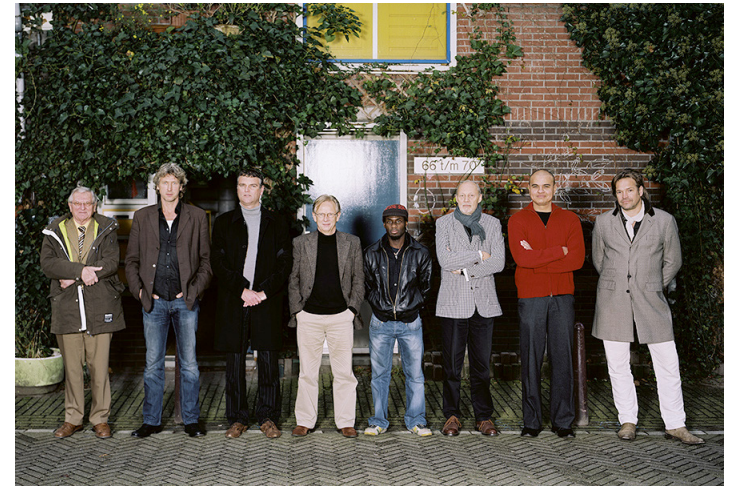
Laurence Aëgerter divides her time between the Netherlands, France and Germany. She herself as it were represents a junction of three countries. Aëgerter is an uncommon surname in the Netherlands and she frequently has to spell her name. For her work A.E.G.E.R.T.E.R. (2009), a series of eight C-prints, she invited eight Dutch people whose first initials make up the letters of her surname. Lined up from left to right are an Anton, Eduard, Gerard, Eduard, Richard, Theodoor, Eduard and Richard. (ill. 1, 2)

Displacements involve translations. Each environment demands a suitable form language adapted to the occasion. This is not just a practical matter, it also has ethical and esthetical dimensions, according to Bourriaud; it is a matter of "fighting for the indeterminacy of the code".³

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, New York 2009, p. 51 – 53.

² Ibid., p. 113 and 131.

³ Ibid, p. 131.



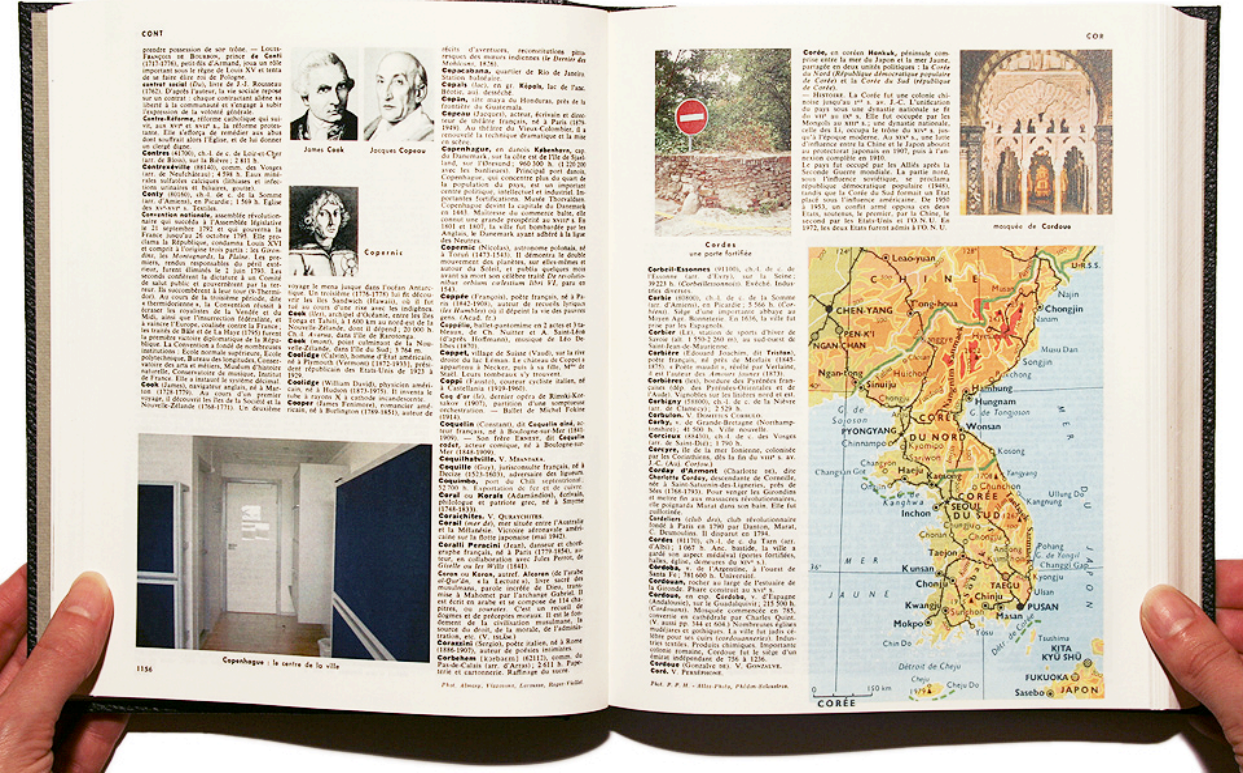
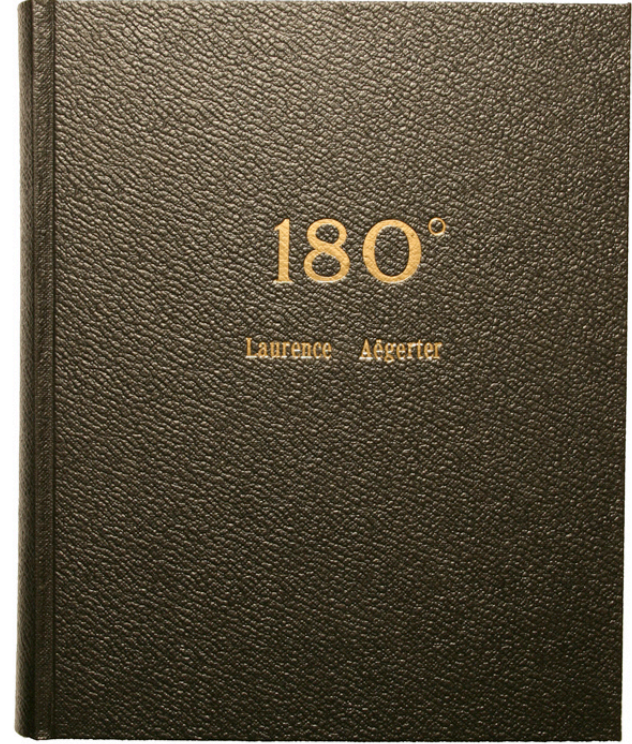
ill. 1 - A.E.G.E.R.T.E.R, 12.00 am, 2008, print on poster, 80x120cm.



ill. 2 - A.E.G.E.R.T.E.R, 14.00 am, 2008, print on poster, 80x120cm.

In 180° *Encyclopaedia* (2007), a facsimile edition of a French Larousse encyclopaedia of 1970, Aëgterter replaced 167 images of landscapes and monuments with the view to be had from these places. (ill. 3) This playful manipulation did not only result in alienating images of apparently meaningless symbols among the familiar images, but also called into question the presumed canonicity of the encyclopaedia.

Aëgterter is actually engaged in 'reshaping "the" real' with a high degree of meticulousness, which throws you off guard for an instant only to make you realize that your perception is distorted because of your preconditioned view. Something similar happens in the case of the photographs of Thomas Demand. They show a reality which at first sight appears to be documentary but on closer analysis turns out to be constructed (in Demand's case entirely constructed).



ill. 3 - 180° Encyclopaedia, 2007, Clermont-Ferrand; au fond, le puy de Dôme, pp. 1144-1145, artist's book, 667 pages.

EDITED REALITY: FROM 'IL GIUSTO ORDINE' TO 'UN ALTRO ORDINE'

The title of a recent work by Aëgerter is: *Si prega di ricollocare i cassetti del catalogo nel giusto ordine* (2012), 'please return the drawers of the catalogue cabinet in the proper order'. These drawers are card-index boxes belonging to the archival furniture of the Venetian Public Library. (ill. 4, 5) Aëgerter's work consists of 60 photographs printed on cards showing the front of these drawers, which were combined in a single card-index box. Both the arbitrariness and the poetry of the archive are reflected in the photographs, which record the entries on the first and the last fiches of each box. The only thing they have in common is that they are alphabetically related: from 'Rianimazione' to 'Rimbaud'. The attitude expressed in this work is also typical for Aëgerter. By playing with the notion of hierarchy she is at the same time playing with the functioning of a catalogue.

Bourriaud claims that the world in which we live is a pure construction, which needs to be analysed by art or adapted in some way or another. By editing the original scripts – through manipulations, rearrangements and insertions – the script from which these shapes derive their illusory legitimacy, is deconstructed. The artist has to de-programme in order to start re-programming, creating alternative, temporary versions of reality with the same material.⁴

This attitude, which reflects an aversion to stasis and hierarchy and a desire to keep things in a state of flux, is already to be found in Walter Benjamin. In his time he proposed a type of writing whereby the card index became a metaphor for a text. A text had to be expandable in all directions, into several dimensions. In the same way as you can move building blocks around, continually generating new forms on the basis of the same elements.⁵

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Precarious constructions", in *Open*, SKOR 2009 (no.17), p. 35. Digital version: [www.skor.nl/_files/Files/OPEN17_P20-37\(3\).pdf](http://www.skor.nl/_files/Files/OPEN17_P20-37(3).pdf).

⁵ **Walter Benjamin's Archive, Images, Texts, Signs**, transl. Esther Leslie, London/New York 2007, p. 29 – 32.



ill. 5 - *Si prega di ricollocare i cassetti del catalogo nel giusto ordine*, 2013, Rianimazione – Rimbaud, detail



ill. 4 - *Si prega di ricollocare i cassetti del catalogo nel giusto ordine*, 2013, 60 photographs on cardboard, 14x22x42 cm.

FROM ARCHIVE OF THE PAST TO SCRIPT FOR THE FUTURE

"For the archive of elapsed forms of life can at any moment turn out to be a script for the future. By being stored in the archive as documentation, life can be repeatedly re-lived and constantly reproduced within historical time, should anyone resolve to undertake such reproduction. The archive is the site where past and future become reversible", according to Boris Groys.⁶ This longing for the reversibility of finished business lies at the root of Aëgerter's work.

For her exhibition *Seek & Hide* in Museum Van Loon (2010), Aëgerter found a blotter from the private archive of Antoinette de B., the occupant of the house. In its time it was an everyday object for use, which probably ended up in the archive by accident. Aëgerter used the pattern of the ink spots as the actual model or background for two textile installations in the house, *Soul Imprints* and *Four Ghosts*. [ill. 6]

⁶ Boris Groys, *De eenzaamheid van het project / The loneliness of the project*, Antwerp 2002, p. 21.



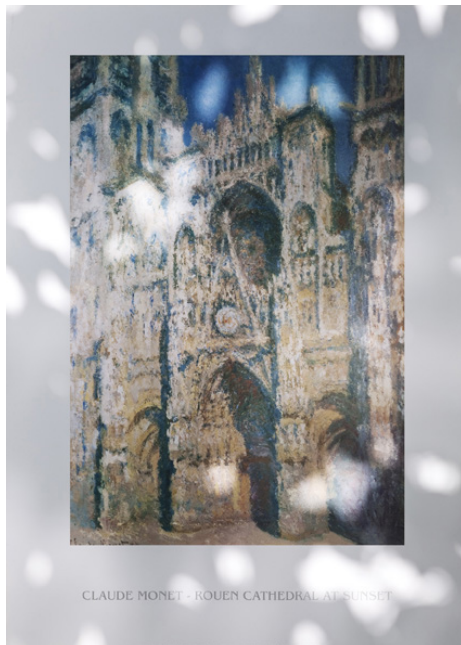
ill. 6 - *Soul Imprints*, 2010. Museum Van Loon, Amsterdam, A pair of double-sided jacquard woven tapestries, mohair, acrylic and phosphorescent threads, 250x200 cm each.

PRECARIOUS CONSTRUCTIONS

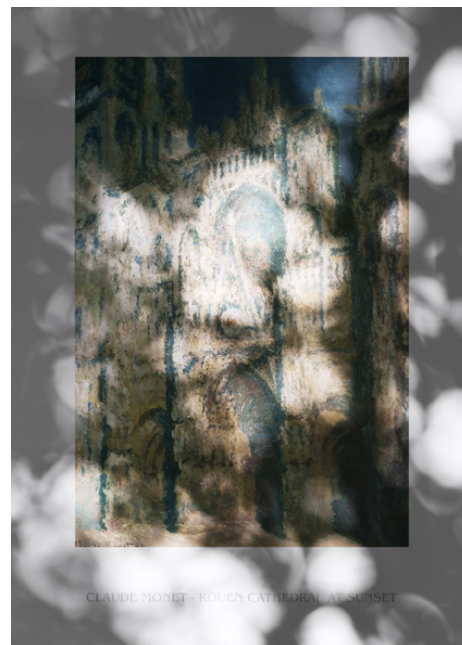
The precarious is an important motif in Aëgerter's work. Take *Cathedrals at Sunset* (2012). (ill. 7, 8, 9) She took a series of photographs of a poster of Monet's *Rouen Cathedral at Sunset*, carefully integrating the changing shadows cast by a tree in front of her workshop in this renewed version of an iconic work.

Reorganizing and incorporating things in another context which result in alternative arrangements or 'precarious constructions', as Bourriaud calls them, dislocates the status quo of the original scripts or at least causes them to falter. Precariousness is not about the immaterial or transitory nature of the artwork but refers to its fundamental instability, which is part of the structure of the work. By denying the immutability of the status quo, every object in fact becomes precarious. "The contemporary artwork does not rightfully occupy a position in a field, but presents itself as an object of negotiation, caught up in a cross-border trade which confronts different disciplines, traditions or concepts. It is this ontological precariousness that is the foundation of contemporary aesthetics", as Bourriaud writes.⁷

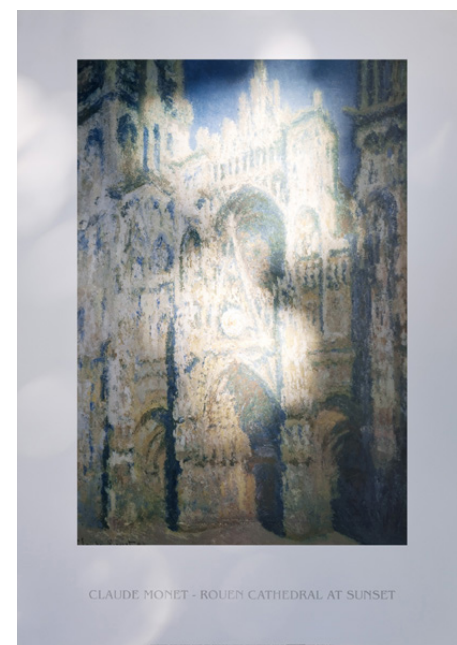
⁷ See note 4.



ill. 7 - Cathedrals at Sunset, 2012,
Cathedral at Sunset no.6, ink on paper, 70x50 cm.



ill. 8 - Cathedrals at Sunset, 2012,
Cathedral at Sunset no. 7, ink on paper, 70x50 cm.



ill. 9 - Cathedrals at Sunset, 2012,
Cathedral at Sunset no. 4, ink on paper, 70x50 cm.

The precarious also plays a role in *An Alphabetical Index of Some of the Stories* (2010), an installation of light boxes on which photographs of dishes in a Chinese restaurant were mounted. (ill. 10) Not only the menus but also the hands of the diners are incorporated in the images. Each dish has been recorded in the corresponding menu as if it were the synopsis of a tale told by the respective diner. Something very ordinary, choosing a dish from the menu in a restaurant, is here actually lifted to the higher level of an autobiographical story.

Both the high status of an iconic work of art and the low status of a menu are an invitation to cross borders for Aëgter.

WITHOUT HIERARCHY

The traditional hierarchy between applied art and autonomous art, between an original and a copy, a catalogue of the Louvre and a menu from a Chinese restaurant, is not important in Aëgter's work. Sources like a telephone directory and an encyclopaedia are equal in status. The same is true for the media she uses; no distinction is made between photographs, wall tapestries, books, posters and advertisements. Nor is there any hierarchy between editions and unique copies. Even the distinction between fact and fiction is occasionally ignored. In one of the in situ installations in the Huis met de Hoofden (House with the Heads) in Amsterdam, reproductions of portraits by Frans Hals and the people who are portrayed in these paintings are treated as equal: from a formal perspective they function as companion pieces, as entities and identities, merging fact and fiction.



ill. 10 - *An Alphabetical Index of Some of the Stories*, 2010, 8 light boxes, 150x275x10 cm.

PRECISION AND COINCIDENCE

Precision is essential because only by strictly following the rules of the game can you find out what has changed. This strategy was followed by Oulipo, the group of which Georges Perec was a member. In this 'workshop of potential literature', several French writers drew inspiration from the conditions or constraints they continually imposed upon themselves.

Similarly, Aëgerter provided a careful reconstruction of the plan of the medicinal garden of the medieval Abbey of Saint Gall on an unused plot of land in Leeuwarden which was once part of a convent. This project, *Herbarium Cataplasma* of 2013, was realized in collaboration with the local residents. The neat order in the garden was accentuated by the looser form of the collages which the residents made with plants. Aëgerter invited the residents for a symbolical healing ritual, whereby photographs of ruined landscapes from the previous century were treated with the medicinal plants and became merged into a new image. (ill. 11, 12)



ill. 11- Healing plants for hurt landscapes, 2013, detail, Cannabis sativa i.a. - coastal Japan.



ill. 12 - Healing plants for hurt landscapes, 2013, detail, Zingiber officinale i.a. - New York, USA.

DISPLACEMENT STRATEGIES

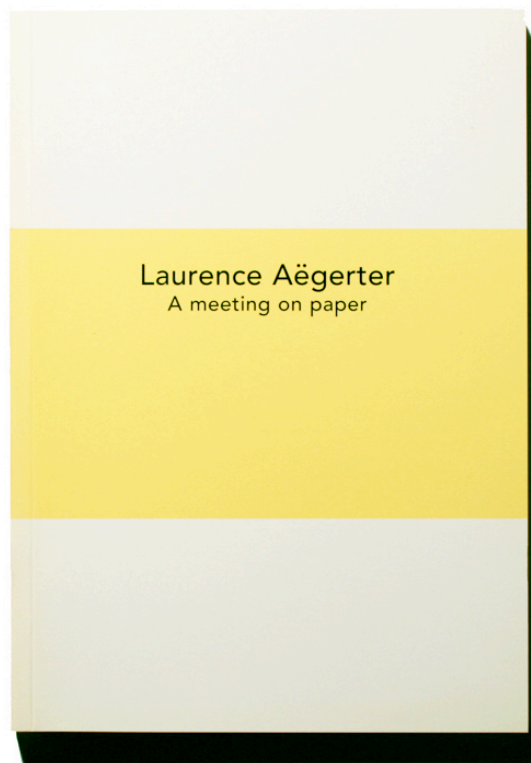
To explore Aëgerter's strategies we briefly return to Bourriaud, who distinguishes, besides the mode of production itself, three main patterns in precarious aesthetics, namely transcoding (forms that navigate through a network made up of photocopies, prints, screens or photographic reproductions surfacing as so many transitory incarnations), flickering and blurring (the indiscernible, pixel format etc).⁸ The displacement strategies Aëgerter applies in her work can be subdivided into the following categories:

⁸ See note 4.

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposing or contrasting two things with completely different shapes or meanings and combining them on the basis of coincidence.

One example is *10 Days, 22 Months*, a work in which two archives of a public and a private drama are juxtaposed. Newspaper clippings of the ten days following the crash of an El Al flight in the Bijlmermeer neighbourhood in Amsterdam, mourned nationally as the 'Bijlmer Disaster', lie side by side with the last picture Aëgerter took of her deceased cousin, a picture she continually photographed for a period of 22 months. The picture became smaller and smaller, in the same way as the news about the Bijlmer Disaster in the end disappeared from public view. Or take *A meeting on paper*, for which the entries and images of the upper parts of the pages from an Elsevier's encyclopaedia were isolated and stripped off the context which gave meaning to their conjunction. The remaining elements result in alienating combinations. (ill. 13)



ill. 13 - A meeting on paper, 2006, Atrophy - Beatles, artist's book, 43 pages.

SUPERPOSITION

Adding a new layer with the added effect of manipulating the underlying layer or entirely or partially hiding it from view.
Stacking historical eras.

In *Le Louvre* and *Het Apparaat*, Laurence Aëgterter joined iconic works from the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum with the spectators of these works to form a new reality. She did so by taking a photograph at the moment when the spectator and the work appeared to merge. (ill. 14, 15) The observers of Aëgterter's photographs in turn identify with the back view of the spectators already immortalized in the image by Aëgterter.

This approach shows similarities with the 'quadri specchianti' or mirror paintings of Michelangelo Pistoletto, who mounted life-size portraits onto mirroring surfaces. The spectator is drawn into the image as he watches, unable to maintain a distance. Watching means becoming involved, becoming part of the image. In Pistoletto's installation in the Louvre (summer 2013), centuries-old works from the museum played a – momentary – role too, as their reflections were caught in the installation.

In both Pistoletto's and Aëgterter's work, we are dealing with a sort of reality to the third power, a layering of moments which coincide in the spectator's gaze. The freezing of a moment so typical of photography is in effect negated, as both past and future can become incorporated in the work.

Aëgterter's Louvre photographs deal with a normal situation which is re-enacted outside normal opening hours. The photographs have not been Photoshopped or manipulated in any way. The encounters are potential realities resulting from observations and earlier experiences with the *Catalogue des Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée du Louvre*. (ill. 16, 17)

A salient detail: when looking at the original iconic works of art, after having studied Aëgterter's images at length, we may have the unsettling experience that something is missing.



ill. 16 - Catalogue des Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée du Louvre, 2009.
p.36-37, artist's book, 100 pages.



ill. 17 - Catalogue des Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée du Louvre, 2009, p. 50-51.



ill.14- Het Apparaat, 2008, SK-C -597-0801251412
(Rembrandt), ink on paper, 40x30 cm.



ill.15 - Het Apparaat, 2008, SK-A-135-0801251456 (Hals),
ink on paper, 40x30 cm.

DOUBLING: REPRODUCTIONS IN THE FORM OF TRANSITORY INCARNATIONS

Trance consists of six voiles with prints from the Rijksmuseum's Print Room showing a woman in various stages of ecstasy. (ill. 18, 19, 20) During the séance she as it were stepped out of herself, as is witnessed by these photographs. Where the images were first fixated in photographs, they are now 'released' with the aid of light and fabric and they remain in motion, altogether in line with the elusive state the woman is in. The reflections that are cast by the light in the library on the photographs in their plastic archival folders appear charged with meaning. The voiles have been gathered in a single 'archive', a cardboard box with a hole. The ecstatic face is outlined above the box as in a three-dimensional hologram. To this same category belong works like *Cathedrals at Sunset* and *Tristes Tropiques*: illustrations hors texte, made in collaboration with Ronald van Tienhoven. The images in the work by Claude Lévi-Strauss were re-enacted 80 years later in a village in the Dutch province of Friesland. (ill. 21)



ill. 21- *Tristes tropiques*: illustrations hors texte, 2011, in collaboration with Ronald van Tienhoven, artist's book, 2x56 pages.



ill. 18 - *Trance*, 2012, Cardboard box and 6 prints on crêpe de Chine, 13,5x36x36 cm.



ill. 19 - *Trance*, 2012, *Trance* nr. 2 print on crêpe de Chine, 155x135 cm.



ill. 20 - *Trance*, 2012. *Trance* nr. 5, print on crêpe de Chine, 155x135 cm.

CUT AND PASTE

'Cut and paste' is about transplanting or incorporating, a process whereby the context is left intact. Projects falling within this category are the previously described projects *180 ° Encyclopaedia* (ill. 3) and *An Alphabetical Index of Some of the Stories* (ill. 10). In *LA LA LA LA* Aëgerter isolated still frames from existing karaoke videos. Text and image were frozen to a fraction of a second, resulting in alienating combinations. (ill. 22, 23)



ill. 22- LA LA LA LA, 2006, Every now and then I fall apart, photograph in perspex, 105x140 cm.



ill. 23 - LA LA LA LA, 2006, LA LA LA LA, photograph in perspex, 105x140 cm.

All is in all and it has always been, (ill. 24, 25) depicts the spiritist séances of Antoinette de Bach-van Loon and her husband. For this project Aëgterter selected some of the questions and answers from a book used by the couple for these sessions which she had found in their archive. She had them embroidered on bed covers made of the same fabric as the one used in the museum.



ill. 24 - *All is in all and it has always been*, 2010, Museum Van Loon, Amsterdam, two pieces of bed covers connected with text embroidery, 200x150 cm each.



ill. 25 - *All is in all and it has always been*, 2010, detail.

FLICKERING

Appearing and disappearing; something pops into view then fades from sight again. Presence and absence alternate.

The Somnambulic Archive is a series of four Jacquard tapestries based on photographs from the archive of the Museum van Loon in Amsterdam. (ill. 26, 27) By using phosphorescent threads, objects charged with meaning are brought to light in the dark. These objects are tied up with personal stories as shown in the photographs. The effect, however, is invisible during the day. Thus in 'Horse's Guide', the servant holding the horse by the lead was scratched away and retouched with brown ink. He was literally cut out of the family's history. In the dark, the deletion becomes all the more noticeable because the scratches and retouches in the tapestry have been rendered in phosphorescent thread.

Longo Mai (Let it Last, a Provençal expression), 2013, consists of four tapestries commissioned for the permanent exhibit of the Musée Borély pour les Arts Décoratifs, la Faïence et la Mode, Marseille. They are two companion pieces: 'Bains de midi' and 'Bains de minuit', daytime and night time swimming. The work is made up of images found on the Internet; the magic is caused by the alteration of the medium. The bathers, whose bodies are worked in phosphorescent thread, light up in the dark. This is in fact a 'vanitas in reverse': capturing that blissful moment of becoming immersed in the water is at odds with the bodies that light up and fade away again.

32 TFS Double Life includes archival photographs of an exuberant New Year's Eve party from the photo album of an army officer. (ill. 28, 29) They are reproduced on woven fabrics which were hung in place of the cots in the bunker in Soesterberg in the Netherlands, where the officer was stationed at the time of the Cold War. The light is switched on and off by a computer at two minutes' interval, giving the portraits, which were worked in phosphorescent thread, the air of death masks.

Works on spiritist appearances (and invisibilities) also fall within this category.



ill. 26 - The Somnambulic Archive, The Horse's guide I, 2012, mixed yarns including horse's hair and phosphorescent yarns, 163x211 cm.



ill. 29- 32 TFS, Double Life, 2011, detail.



ill. 28- 32 TFS, Double Life, 2011, underground bunker, former military base of Soesterberg (NL).



ill. 27 - The Somnambulic Archive, The Horse's guide I, 2012, phosphorescent at night.

MUTUAL RESONANCE AND INTERRELATEDNESS

Aägerter's works resonate with each other and sometimes resurface in another context after a number of years. The complete trajectory of a project and all of the individual and reverberating processes that play a role, are influenced by elements from previous projects and offer avenues of approach for new layers or translations. So does the choice of and research into the possibilities of continuously changing materials or media to embody things in the most effective and relevant way. Consciously or unconsciously, all that went on before has a significant part to play.

Perhaps the most striking example of this is *Opening Soon / Opening Now*, a project dating from 2009 which led to a wide range of new and largely autonomous projects. As an artist in residence Aëgerter, together with the other participating artists, was given the tacit assignment to 'purify' a former brothel by means of art. By lining up various temporary functions, she reversed this uneasy position and turned it into a public space. Thus she set up a temporary library, a golf club, a snack bar and a public swimming pool in the former brothel. This rapid succession of ambitious services in an area measuring only 9 square metres, is typical of the irony with which she challenged the absurdity of this assignment.

The various events were advertised in the newspaper and on posters, made in collaboration with Jennifer Skupin. *(ill. 30)*
Each individual poster drew attention to the space's current function, while the previous and successive functions were made unreadable but still remained implicitly present.

At the time the space functioned as a library, performances were organised with several men reading passages from their favourite books to women who were unknown to them. These private performances in fact were the reverse pattern of the visits to prostitutes which used to take place here. These events were then carefully archived, and Aëgerter also composed a text about the ontology of the empty space, an emptiness which is far more poignant than a room filled with memorabilia. She then distributed this text in front of the Anne Frank Museum among the queue of people waiting to visit the most emotionally charged empty space in Amsterdam.



ill. 30 - Opening Soon / Opening Now, 2009, in collaboration with Jennifer Skupin, silkscreened posters, unique copy, 84x59 cm.

To prepare for *Opening Soon / Opening Now* she collected, as a kind of 'sketches', images of the several new functions of the space by combining Google Images with the search terms 'swimming pool', 'library' and 'snack bar'. The images were then projected in the relevant context, and the projections were also photographed. (ill. 31, 32) All of these different layers are an integral part of the project.

Some of the techniques Aëgarter applies more than once until she has succeeded in documenting their full range and potential. This is for instance the case with the phosphorescent threads which she used in several ways in the Museum Van Loon, the bunker in Soesterberg and the Museum Borély in Marseille.

Sources, too, can be examined several times, as is the case with Monet's cathédrales in *Cathedrals at Sunset* (2012) and *Cathédrales* (2014), an artist's book based on a page opening showing Bourges cathedral from a book published in the 1950s, with a rusty staple in the centre. In fact she shifted three layers of time over each other to create something new. A single work can also lead to several, equally valid and autonomous, variations, as was the case in the *Opening Soon / Opening Now* project described above.

In all cases, research predominates. Each time she investigates possibilities of making something visible in the most meaningful way. The process can become incorporated in the work which is eventually displayed, which in turn may only be a potential part of the more comprehensive project or trajectory to which it belongs. In the end, everything revolves around the interrelated categories of Aëgarter's work.



ill. 31- KP23, 2009, KP23 no. 3 (snack bar), c-print, 120x175 cm.



ill.32 - KP23, 2009, KP23 no.6 (swimming pool), c-print, 120x180 cm.

ELASTICITY OF PRESENCE

Sources like artworks or books retrieved from the archives of history are updated by connecting them with the present. The original work is brought back to life as it were. Incorporated in contemporary works, the historical sources are released from their condition of stasis. By contrast, the present is extended by means of the past, thereby acquiring a certain depth. This Elasticity of Presence can be regarded as the leading principle in Aëgerter's work.

Closely related to this are the concepts of distance and aura. Walter Benjamin described the concept of aura in numerous different ways; as a *here, on the spot* and as a *now, a one-off*, but also as a "strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be".⁹ The history or tradition of which something is a part is embedded in the – new – reality. The effect is a layering of things, of simultaneous experiences of a different spatiality: reality (a work of art in situ) and the history or tradition of which it is a part.¹⁰

But the aura in Walter Benjamin's sense of the word can be reversed or extended. It is especially this elasticity which Aëgerter explores. Thus the context can have a powerful impact on the Elasticity of Presence and some reproductions have a strong aura of authenticity. In the case of stolen, destroyed or otherwise inaccessible paintings there is no other way of getting closer than by means of a reproduction. Sometimes a work is mainly familiar from the reproduction studied in a book; that first introduction is also an auratic experience.

Photography cancels the finiteness of a moment but also fixates it in the process. By incorporating new possibilities or the past in an image, the static moment can be extended and become fluid again. Using displacement strategies such as superposition and flickering, Aëgerter manipulates the rigorousness of time and activates the Elasticity of Presence.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Little history of photography" in *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility and other writings on media*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2008 (or. German ed. 1931), p. 285.

¹⁰ Ibid.

CREDITS

"Reshaping the Real, Displacement Strategies in the Work of Laurence Aëgerter" is an essay by Renée Borgonjen on the leitmotif in the work of Aëgerter, written in conjunction with the mutual research project *Elasticity of Presence*.

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