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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/interfaces/820>

DOI: [10.4000/interfaces.820](https://doi.org/10.4000/interfaces.820)

ISSN: 2647-6754

**Publisher:**

Université de Bourgogne, Université de Paris, College of the Holy Cross

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 July 2020

Number of pages: 65-74

ISSN: 1164-6225

**Electronic reference**

Ernst Van Alphen and Valérie Morisson, "Ernst Van Alphen in Conversation with Valérie Morisson", *Interfaces* [Online], 43 | 2020, Online since 15 July 2020, connection on 07 January 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/interfaces/820> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/interfaces.820>

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## ERNST VAN ALPHEN IN CONVERSATION WITH VALÉRIE MORISSON

Ernst Van Alphen  
*Leiden University*

Valérie Morisson  
*Université de Bourgogne Franche-Comté*

Ernst van Alphen is a professor of Literary Studies at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society. His research focuses on modern and post-modern literature and its relation to visual arts; his approach of the arts, painting, sculpture and photography, puts affects to the fore. In his outstanding volume *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (Reaktion Book, 2014), Ernst Van Alphen investigated archival artworks and how such works broaden the scope of artistic production. He also contributed a text to the exhibition catalogue of Marjan Teeuwen's *Destroyed House*, a body of works which inspired this conversation (see her site at <https://www.marjanteeuwen.nl/>). In her temporary *in-situ* monumental sculptures or sculptural monuments the Dutch artist reassembles fragments of buildings that were destroyed, thereby turning ruins and chaos into vulnerable architectures of renewal and rebirth.

**Valérie Morisson:** When I visited Marjan Teeuwen's installation, *Destroyed House*, in Arles last summer, which was set on the site of a former garage, I was impressed by the fact that although the work was designated as a house it was both a sculpture and a piece of architecture. Should the term "house" be understood as metaphorical in Marjan Teeuwen's installations?

**E. V. A.:** Although today more and more people live in tents or other temporary constructions, and a house can also consist of a boat, as in a houseboat, we first of all think of an architectural construction, a building, in which people live and which they have made their home. But the word "house" signifies more than just the building that offers a home; it also stands for family. When we talk about the House of Orange we do not refer to one of their royal palaces. The term covers the complete lineage and ancestry of the family, not only the family members that are still alive. In other words, the word "house" also refers to a family and its roots, to genealogical memory. In languages such as English, French and Dutch the use of the word house is metaphorical. Only in special contexts and cases does it have this meaning of /family/ as intertwined with the architectural meaning. The best-known example is Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Fall of the House of Usher". The House of Usher is not diagnosed by its destruction but by its downfall, which indicates that it concerns primarily a family and not a building, although the collapse of the building materializes the downfall, indeed the extinction of the family. In Arab and Hebrew, however, they have one term that has these two different meanings systematically. The Arab word "bait" and the Hebrew word "bet" are homonyms. They each concern a concept – or, if you wish, two words that are both spelled and pronounced identically, but have different meanings. In those languages the destruction of a house is completely ambiguous: it refers to the destruction of a building that serves as a home to people and to the destruction of the genealogical memory of a family; and the one through the other, because the physical construction is the equivalent of the roots of a family its harbours.

**V. M.:** It is this complexity which surfaces when Marjan Teeuwen intervenes on soon-to-be-destroyed houses as the memory of the inhabitants is etched on the walls. Another very famous project related to the destruction of a house was Rachel Whiteread's *House*, 1993, which actually blended the metaphorical house which you have just defined and more political and social considerations. The work, situated on Mile End Road, East London, was the plaster cast of a typical Victorian terraced house which was pulled down prior to the redevelopment of the area (to which the occupant of the house was opposed). In this case, the idea of the home as a safe protecting shelter for the family contrasts with the marketable house whose value fluctuates according to political circumstances. Is local history equally at stake in Marjan Teeuwen's works? In other words, to what extent are the destroyed houses situational or site-specific?

**E. V. A.:** The titles of these projects are specified by the location of the house: *Destroyed House* (2007/2008), *Destroyed House Krasnoyarsk* (2009), *Destroyed House Piet Mondriaanstraat* (2010-2011), *Destroyed House Bloemhof* (2012), *Destroyed House Op Noord* (2014), *Destroyed House Leiden* (2015), *Destroyed House Gaza* (2017), and most recently *Destroyed House Arles* (2019). All these projects were interventions in houses that had been discarded and destined to be destroyed. They were old or ruined and there was no reason to renovate them anymore. It was their fate to be destroyed. When she completed her *Destroyed Houses* in several locations in the Netherlands, and even in Russia with *Destroyed House Krasnoyarsk* and in France with *Destroyed House Arles*, this evocation of memory remained rather abstract or general. The embodiment of memory in these projects remained implicit because no specific memories seemed to be involved, no specific pasts imposed themselves. Most critics and visitors of the *Destroyed House* series were impressed by the beauty of her creations/destructions and by the obsessiveness of the performance that resulted in this stirring, unconventional beauty, but they did not make the association with the “work of memory”. In the case of *Destroyed House Gaza* the recognition of the destroyed house as an embodiment of the work of memory is unavoidable. It is the context of Gaza that transforms the abstract idea of memory into a concrete one. But *Destroyed House Gaza* impels us now to reconsider our formalistic readings in terms of beauty and obsession of the other *Destroyed House*. The contexts of each *House* should be taken into consideration in order to better understand and appreciate the kind of memories that have been shaped by the ordering of debris.

**V. M.:** *Destroyed House Gaza* is obviously highly contextual given the history of the conflict.

**E. V. A.:** Yes, if we consider more particularly *Destroyed House Gaza* and *Destroyed House Arles*, it seems obvious that the two houses differ in that the political and social context of the former is undeniable, whereas the context of the second is rather abstract: no recognizable memories impose themselves immediately. In order to better understand what kind of contexts impose themselves in these destroyed houses, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by the “work of memory”. According to the common sense understanding of memories, memories are passed over from the past to the present. We “have” memories, in the sense that they *have* arrived from the past. However, a more productive notion of memory understands memory as an act performed in the present, which establishes a relation to the past. This transforms memory from a passive reception into a performed act, consciously or not. This notion of memory enables us to understand Teeuwen’s “de(con)structions” as acts of memory (Bal et al. vii-xvii).

**V. M.:** The term “act” is highly important indeed because memory is stamped into the fabric of the works surfacing on each fragment, it becomes perceptibly haptic.

E. V. A.: These are rather concrete memories. In *Destroyed House Gaza*, the most striking elements of the built/reorganized structures were two pillars, a black one and a white one, that reached from the bottom floor of the building through the opened floors up to the ceiling of the top floor. These two architectural pillars looked like the backbones or spines of a body. These spines are centers that hold the entire architectural structure together, literally as well as figuratively; they are like the nerve centers of this space. The black nerve center referred to the black spots and traces on the walls and floors left by the bomb that had hit the house. The white nerve center referred to the original white colour of the walls. Although the expression ‘backbone’ suggests that these pillars are solid, stable, and able to hold the whole house together, in fact the two spines look rather fragile and vulnerable. One cannot be sure if they can still hold the rooting and the memories of the family that they embody. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is not just an armed conflict fought by means of conventional weapons. Ultimately it is a war on memory, in which houses and trees are employed as powerful instruments of warfare. Both states claim to be rooted in the same land, and those claims are based on memory. Houses and trees have become the most important cultural symbols that are central in their respective articulations of rootedness. Houses and trees symbolically remind Israelis as well as Palestinians of their rootedness in the same contested area. As one scholar put it, these cultural symbols claiming rootedness and ownership over the land have become major stakes in this war on memory, “of which some of the most salient examples are Israel’s massive uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, the punitive demolition of Palestinian homes, and the Israeli overplanting of bulldozed Palestinian orchards and villages with non-native pine forests, and the construction of settlements in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank” (Van Gelder, 12). Israeli legal scholar Irus Braverman suggests that the seeming unimportance of houses and trees to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict harbours a denial of their true significance. He argues that acts of planting/uprooting and building/unbuilding are in fact acts of war, regulated by a range of legal strategies (Braverman 2009). In the context of conflict in which houses and trees are powerful cultural symbols as well as instruments of warfare in the war on memory, *Destroyed House Gaza* does not evoke memory abstractly, but utterly concretely and politically, albeit implicitly – as becomes art. Contrary to political journalism and propaganda, political art achieves its convincing effect by an appeal to viewers to reconsider their routine convictions because they are emotionally and intellectually affected. Teeuwen’s interventions in *Destroyed House Gaza* are at the same time interventions in the Israeli/Palestinian memory war: they make visible the fact that the Arab homonym “bait” and the Hebrew homonym “bet” refer to the destruction of a building serving as a home to people as well as to the destruction of the genealogical memory of a family. For the rooting of human beings is embodied in the cultural symbol of the house, and their uprooting in its destruction. When we take into consideration the context of the war on memory taking place in Gaza, the two

pillars are more than just backbones; they are roots that connect the family that lived there before the house was destroyed to the land of Palestine. They are family roots. From this perspective it is significant that the first thing Teeuwen did was to dig out the soil under the first floor; she removed one and a half meter of sand. This digging out of the soil is more than a simple way of creating more space; it opens up the place where roots grow and makes these roots visible. On top of a low pile of ordered stones Teeuwen showed the fragmented remains of the bomb that had destroyed the house and killed one of its inhabitants. All other material used by Teeuwen was insignificant as such; the re-use of it evoked the ordering process and activity of memory, but not specific memories. The remains of the bomb, however, distinguished themselves from the other materials, by signifying a specific memory: the moment in the forty-five years history of the building that the house was destroyed by being hit by bombs and grenades. The briefest moment in time definitively modified the spatial structure. The small display of remains of bombs and grenade shards could easily be overlooked because it was much less overwhelming and impressive than the obsessively-structured space in which it was placed. But one could also claim that this modest, easily overlooked, exhibition is the centre of Teeuwen's *Destroyed House*, because memory is not evoked as an ordering, archival process but in the form of a specific object of memory. It is here, in the traces of this intensely loaded moment, that the location of the *Destroyed House Gaza* is inescapably significant.

**V. M.:** The evocation of war-related memories lends the piece a commemorative dimension, yet the destroyed houses are more than monuments to the dead. Would you say that *Destroyed House Gaza* is more transformative than commemorative?

**E. V. A.:** By means of her interventions Teeuwen has transformed the bombed, ruined house into an architectural sculpture, as well as into a site of memory. The term 'site of memory' has been introduced by French historian Pierre Nora. These sites are places, objects, or other phenomena which have become of symbolic significance to a particular group of people when the continuity between past and present is broken. Monuments, memorials, but also specific days of the year during which a specific loss or event is commemorated, can function as sites of memory. Although houses, olive trees and pine trees already have symbolic significance in Palestine and Israel, this significance is general and not tied to specific houses or trees. Teeuwen's interventions in *Destroyed House Gaza* have intensified the symbolical significance of the house and turned it into a site of memory.

**V. M.:** This framework may not be as relevant for other installations in which the context is maybe less central to the perception of the structure.

**E. V. A.:** Absolutely. The same cannot be argued for *Destroyed House Arles* (2019). Although this house also embodies the work of memory, it does not transcend into a site of memory,

because no concrete contexts evoking specific memories impose themselves. Still, this destroyed house has formal features that make it different from all of Teeuwen's other destroyed houses. What immediately strikes the eye is the horizontality of the spaces and of the ordering of all the debris inside the spaces. The piles of reordered materials are horizontally layered. And whereas in *Destroyed House Gaza*, *Destroyed House Leiden*, and *Destroyed House op Noord* floors and ceilings were opened up to create height and depth in the destroyed houses, *Destroyed House Arles* does not contain this kind of vista. When floors and ceilings were opened up, the illusion of an endless space was created, reminiscent of the images by 18th century artist Piranesi. Connections and associations established by the activity of memory are enabled by opening up and connecting all the spaces in these houses. The house as embodiment of memory depends on the intensification and materialization of links, relations and connections, performed by the opening up of all surfaces that so far blocked views. It is precisely this aspect which is missing in *Destroyed House Arles*. The kind of memory that is embodied and evoked in Arles instead, is the memory of a horizontally layered society. A class-based society that does allow or enable little exchange between the different classes of this society.

**V. M.:** Interestingly then the work may excavate or unearth otherwise muted episodes of social history. How did this unexpected history emerge?

**E. V. A.:** First of all the installation in Arles is labyrinthic, the floors are dug out and the work consists in many horizontal layers of stone, but also of sandbags filled with sand and rubble. Historically and contextually this evokes the trenches in Northern France and Belgium during the first World War. But there is more to it. The organizers of *Les Rencontres Arles 2019* who had invited Teeuwen to make this destroyed house in Arles during the photo festival, turned out to be the commissioners as well. The relationship was not "human", an interaction on the basis of equality and friendship, but was one of employer and employee. The working within this kind of class-based organization was made worse by endless bureaucratic hassle about licenses that had not been, or too late, arranged by Teeuwen's employers. And it is impossible to talk with French bureaucrats. I contend that the striking horizontal layering of *Destroyed House Arles* evokes the horizontal layering of the French society Teeuwen encountered when working there. She did not only de(con)struct a house in Arles, but by doing so she provided a deconstruction of French society. Of course, one could say, in which sense is this deconstruction of French society related to the work of memory? Earlier I argued that the memories evoked by her destroyed houses depend on the contexts of which these houses are part. *Destroyed House Gaza* is probably the most convincing case in Teeuwen's series of works. Memory becomes concrete here, because it is the memory of a Palestinian family, its rooting by means of their memory contained by a house, that is at stake here. The context of French society and the memories of French

employers are less different from the context in Gaza than it seems at first sight. The problem is that the term “context” is first of all seen as a spatial term because “con-“ implies spatial encompassing, whereas memory is temporal. This suggests that context and memory should be clearly distinguished, because they belong to different dimensions. But, in fact, they are closely entangled. Context is utterly temporal as well as spatial. And memories do not come from that different temporality, from the past. Memories are acts performed in the present establishing a relation to the past. In contrast with past and future, the present is not an exclusively temporal category. The present is the context we live in and the acts of memory we perform in that present-day context. This suggests that the horizontal layering of French class-based society and the work of memory evoking that same horizontal society, are both anchored in the present. There, then, the art work and the society that hosts it are bound together by an interface.

**V. M.:** The idea of binding past and present, the personal and the political is at the core of the work: no cement is used but the diverse materials are made to fit; they are ordered according to shape and colour, and piled up to provide stability and design patterns. Each wall or opening is built and decorated like a sculpture, the materials collected on the site are arranged so as to create decorative patterns. Something beautiful and highly textural emerges out of the rubble.

**E. V. A.:** Teeuwen re-uses the remainders of the ruined houses. They are piled up; windows or other kinds of openings are closed off by left-over materials. She also creates sculptures out of debris, rubbish and used materials. These added interventions to the ruined house sometimes consist of an arbitrary collection of materials. Sometimes however all the re-used materials are selected and categorized on the basis of materials and colours. Teeuwen did this for example in her *Archive* series and in the architectural sculptures created in several of her *Destroyed Houses*. Most of the time the re-used materials are selected on the basis of colours, mostly white or black; for instance, harmonious white piles and architectural sculptures consisting of plaster plate, plasterboard, wood, plastics, and more. At other times the piles are intersected by the horizontal black stripes of the space in between the layers of plasterboard. Or the use of painted planks, which formerly covered the floors, results in structured piles that counter the desolate disharmony of the discarded houses. Although the structured piles are highly complex, aesthetically they look minimalistic because of the seriality of the structures and the reduced colour scheme; black, the brown colour of wood, but especially white are the dominant colours. Earlier works, like the *Huiskamer* (“Living Room”) series are extremely colourful. They look as if all the belongings present in a living room had been re-ordered into piles, without making a selection on the basis of colour or kind of object. Although they do not make a minimalistic impression because of the abundance of colours and the great variety of objects, these works, too, demonstrate an obsessive practice of ordering and structuring.



**V. M.:** And the visitors can see the tremendous amount of work necessary for such re-ordering. One could compare the long time spent on collecting, sorting-out, classifying, re-ordering and re-constructing to the time one needs to overcome grief or loss in the process of mourning. In the text you dedicated to *Destroyed House* (Marjan Teeuwen, *Destroyed House*) you also compare the reconstruction process to the activity of memory.

**E. V. A.:** Yes because Marjan's creation of beauty and harmony out of chaos and destruction is not an end in itself. The beauty of the practice of ordering and structuring is highly significant; it embodies the ordering activity of memory. The activity of memory is explicitly evoked by the titles of a series of works she made between 2007 and 2010 in the *Archive* series: *Archive 1-4*, *Archive Sheddak SM's*, *Archive Johannesburg* and a recent assignment, *Archive Temporarily Hall of Justice Amsterdam 1-5*. Although not situated in discarded houses, and not dealing with architectural interventions like destroying walls, floors and ceilings, these works share similar characteristics with the *Destroyed Houses*, to which they add meanings. Archives are physical storages of memory and in archival processes we can recognize the activity of memory. Archives and memory collect objects and events. But they do not do this arbitrarily. Archives and memory are selective in how they collect. If they did not select they would end up as arbitrary storages. But the ordering activity of archives and memory implies that many objects and events are discarded, refused, repressed, forgotten. What is selected to be kept and relished is not just stored. Archives and memory categorize; they put together objects or events with the same or similar qualities. They create links between objects and events that are different in some respects but have qualities in common in other respects<sup>1</sup>. This view of the archive suggests that Teeuwen's interventions in discarded houses should be understood as archival practices embodying the work of memory. Her creation of order in chaos does concern both a rebuilding / the transformation of the house and a return of memory to the house. She visualizes and materializes the house-as-memory, the work of memory and the rootedness of the people who lived there, both being embodied by the house. Not the roots, but the rooting. From this perspective it is important to notice that her interventions in the discarded houses do not only consist of pilings of selected left-over materials. She also opens up floors or removes walls, creating views through spaces that were so far closed off. Connections and associations established by the activity of memory are enabled by opening up and connecting all spaces in these houses. The house as embodiment of memory depends on the intensification and materialization of links, relations and connections, performed by opening up of all surfaces that so far blocked views. In this, Teeuwen's projects resonate with the famous view of memory presented by Frances A. Yates, who

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the principles that determine archival organisations, see my book *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in Times of New Media*. London: Reaktion books, 2015.

traced the theories of memory from antiquity on, before the invention of print came along to assist us in memorizing, and focused especially on the art of memorizing by means of a walk through a house. Each room becomes the storage space for particular memories, and space becomes the host of time. Many artists have taken up Yates's vision, among whom Italo Calvino.

**V. M.:** One may also quote the wonderful text by Carl Gustav Jung, published in *Memories, Dreams, Reflection* in 1963, in which he recounts his famous house-related dream. The reader may follow the psychoanalyst visiting the various storeys of a house, from the rococo rooms of the upper storeys to a bare vault in the basement harbouring scattered bones, skulls and the remains of a primitive civilisation. The house encapsulates the history of human civilisation and materializes Jung's notion of the archetype as the fundamental structure of the psyche. Is there an attempt, through *Destroyed House*, to chart a universal, archetypal story or history?

**E. V. A.:** The house itself can be seen as a universal or archetypal place, but I do not think that Teeuwen uses the motif of the house in order to tell a universal history of civilization. On the contrary. This universal place is staged as the embodiment of specific memories and traumas.

**V. M.:** Marjan Teeuwen's projects have often been compared to Gordon Matta-Clark's, but you see a major difference between their works.

**E. V. A.:** Yes because these comparisons only make sense at first sight, but become much less meaningful when we look more closely at their projects. Like Teeuwen, Matta-Clark intervened in houses that were going to be demolished. He opened up views in and through the building by removing geometrical forms from walls or floors. Often this gave the impression that the house had been hit by a meteorite. In contrast with Teeuwen, he never selected, re-used and re-ordered the materials that came out of the house. He called his artistic practice "anarchitecture," conflating the words "anarchy" with "architecture". This condensation added the political twist of anarchy to the domain of architecture and the home. The personal domain of the home was opened up to the public domain, inside and outside were connected, and the place of the home was converted into a state of mind that refused the political distinction between personal and public (Russi Kirshner). Both Teeuwen and Matta-Clark transform buildings into artistic statements. But Teeuwen's interventions in discarded houses take a very different direction. Although she also opens up views in and through the houses in which she intervenes, her selecting and re-ordering of the materials of the house resonate with the surrounding social reality in a different way from Matta-Clark's interventions. The devices by means of which Teeuwen embodies the inner activity and process of memory in the ruined houses cannot be recognized in the works of the American artist. Nor are the meanings these interventions generate comparable to Matta-Clark's effects.

**V. M.:** In this issue of *Interfaces*, several contributors investigate the complex relation between creation and destruction. We were particularly interested in residual presences as they evidence the interplay of these two moments, they are the material traces of artistic imagination. While some artists have explored the limits of the *tabula rasa*, it seems that for Marjan Teeuwen destruction is the very condition of creation.

**E. V. A.:** The different projects of the *Destroyed House* series Teeuwen carried out have in common that they create order out of chaos, and beauty out of ugliness. Moreover, they deconstruct the notion of destruction itself, proposing creation not as the opposite of destruction, but as being intimately entangled with it, namely as its precondition. By performing creation as an activity that establishes a new architectural sculpture with a new order, structure, links and relations, she evokes the ordering, archival activity of memory.

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