

Mind Games

STEVEN HENRY MADOFF ON MARCEL VAN EEDEN AND ANETA GRZESZYKOWSKA

BY ANY MEASURE, Karl McKay Wiegand (1875–1942) led an extraordinary life. He had multiple careers as a gangster, bootlegger, mountain climber, Abstract Expressionist, naval commander, chancellor, and matinee idol. At times he took on several of these roles at once. Dutch artist Marcel van Eeden recounts Wiegand's exploits in a suite of 150 pencil drawings done in the style of old news photos and snapshots and simply titled *K. M. Wiegand. Life and Work, 2005–2006*. Here we see him scaling a rock face, getting handcuffed, being sworn into office, or standing glamorously with a starlet in the glare of the paparazzi's flash. Here are the covers of the books he wrote and the scrawled drawings he did as a child. But then Van Eeden knows Wiegand's remarkable story better than anyone else—since he made most of it up.

There actually was a K. M. Wiegand—a botanist who enjoyed a long, successful, and apparently placid life as a scholar at Cornell University. Yet what Van Eeden gives us is “Wiegand,” a flight of biographical fantasy so lush, so giddily extensive that it seems to encompass whole swaths of twentieth-century ambition while playing like a cartoon opera inspired by spy novels, Hollywood gossip, society memoirs, and macho elaboration. Many of the drawings are captioned, the texts frequently broken off midsentence to suggest that these fiercely imagined scenes, like a fever dream, are just fragments of Wiegand's deliciously manifold saga. Time itself has multiple identities in these pictures.

When the suite was shown at the Berlin Biennial last winter, it had a particular poignancy in the context of the exhibition. With its use of various buildings up and down the venerable Auguststrasse, heavy with the history of its Jewish girls' school and its deportation point for the concentration camps, the biennial took the sovereignty of memory and of place as a given. But that's not to say that it did so without a knowing playfulness and curiosity—just what one expects from the curatorial team of Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, and Ali Subotnick. Of course, the complicated theme of memory in contemporary culture resonates far beyond Auguststrasse, and so Van Eeden's amusingly subversive work, like a fun house of memory, seemed to echo sentiments captured in a phrase written by another Cornell professor whom Wiegand might have come to know had he lived six



Marcel van Eeden, *K. M. Wiegand. Life and Work, 2005–2006*, one of 150 pencil drawings on paper, 19½ x 24¼”

years longer: that lover of paradox Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote in his autobiography, *Invitation to a Beheading*, “I do not believe in time.”

It would seem that Van Eeden doesn't believe in time either. But this is only to say that he, like Nabokov, is evidently so fascinated by the kaleidoscopic eventfulness of life and how each of us is changed over its course that he exaggerates time's brilliant surface, which shines like the mirrored convexity of a bubble, so that all the images that pass over it are at once super-real, suspect, and achingly fragile. In all his outlandishly multifarious identity, Wiegand is an extravagant elegy for the demise of the authentic self, but an elegy under the profound pressure, as I've said, of what memory is in contemporary life. And Van Eeden was not alone in Berlin in his exploration of the subject.

In a nondescript apartment used by the biennial as an exhibition space, Aneta Grzeszykowska's *Album, 2005*, sat on an otherwise bare table. At first glance the book seems humble enough—203 snapshots, eighty-eight in color, the rest in black and white, unremarkable except for the fact that she has digitally removed herself from every one of them, so that the

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viewer experiences a philosophical double take as the offhand images of family and friends yield up little visual gaps and leave a larger existential one. Among the photos was an image of a small child in a belted saaten suit and a matching wide-brimmed hat the color of peach sherbet, leaning ever so slightly to his right in front of a festooned Christmas tree. Grzeszykowska must have been there, leaning toward him. In another photo, in the top row of a group of Catholic girls, far to the right, a space is opened up just between the last two celebrants: She must have been there, too. In the backseat of a car, we view the cropped shoulders and arms of two figures, while the camera lens stares straight between them at what is now only a gap. And here is a vacant schoolyard, patches of snow on the ground, a stone path, a tree, a white bench in the background, the camera trained on the center of the image, where no one stands.

I'm reminded of the scene that opens Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*,

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Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Album (detail)*, 2005, photo album, 16¼ x 11¼ x 1¼”

in which the Czech Communist leader Klement Gottwald is lent a fur hat by a man simply called Clementis, who stands next to him on a balcony as they're photographed in a flurry of snow. When Clementis is hanged years later for treason, the photograph is retouched. The place where he stood is empty, and all that's left of him is his hat, still propped on Gottwald's head. Yet Grzeszykowska's alterations provoke a reading that stretches beyond the political, and at the base of this reading is the question of remembrance: how we remember ourselves and how we are remembered by others.

Memory isn't solely a neurological activity through which we each recognize the self as a coherent unit, as an anchor to our identities. Memory is also a cultural repository, a storage house of filtered facts that we call history, which serves up precedents and homilies from the past to show the citizens of the present how they should behave, how to legitimate the ruling power or god it. And of course in the late twentieth century, memory became a term that is synonymous with data storage and computers. We're all tethered to hard drives and databases, and to the task of endlessly

searching like digital miners through the rubble of experience and knowledge. The way that Google has entered our lives indicates how profoundly reliant we are on an infinitely deep and infinitely accessible global memory, not solely on our personal ones.

Still, the fusion of personal, cultural, and technological memory in contemporary life has only made recollection more complex as a subject and as an activity, and the fallibility of memory, along with its capriciousness, are the crux of Van Eeden's and Grzeszykowska's projects in Berlin. Even when it is healthy, the mind manipulates and distorts memories as replicas of original events. Yet there is a consequence of neural damage, a syndrome called confabulation, that's ripe for a larger symbolic role. Confabulations are verbal or visual accounts of events in which personal experiences can be entwined with things unrelated to one's own experience—a news broadcast, a story snatched from a novel, a conversation overheard. The confabulist doesn't know what is and isn't true in the telling of his own story. These are, in digital terms, glitches, data corruptions, while in neurological terms the confabulist suffers anosognosia: an inability to recognize the presence of the disease.

To be inside Van Eeden's *K. M. Wiegand*, to imagine being Wiegand, is to be a confabulist. To be inside Grzeszykowska's *Album* is to be a confabulist turned inside out, turning yourself into nothing everywhere you've been. In either case, to be outside of the work, to be its maker, is to be an ironist, a commentator on cultural confabulation in an age in which the ceaseless data flow of events, anecdotal trifles, spectacular images, and profligate fictions is so present and quick that our “I” is untethered from gravity, lightened, our identities easily unmoored. Irony here is a schism; the multiplication or subtraction of the self induces a rupture between the visual facts before our eyes and the knowledge that these aren't facts at all but fantasy, manipulation, and (self-)deception. The works' suggestion of confabulation as a cultural phenomenon has a mordant sting, the sharp rap of truth—as if into dysfunction.

Van Eeden's Wiegand, for all his impossibly accomplished parts, is really so profuse a personality that he, too, becomes nothing at all. Finally he's like

Grzeszykowska's disappeared self: a vaporous assemblage of fragile, infinitely mutable bits of data. Welcome to the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the accumulation of personal and cultural memories now compiled second by second seems like bottomless riches. On the other hand, we're distorted, fractured, or we simply disappear in the weightless scatter of information strewn across databases that serve as the archives of human memory.

Maybe that seems too grand, too portentous, and yet this is what Van Eeden and Grzeszykowska offer: doll spectacles of the self imagining the most remarkable things without having lived them, becoming lost in them, or vanishing entirely into the ceaseless accumulation of facts, images, and phantasms. The extrapolation from the confabulist effect is obvious: We are creating a social contract that no longer honors the property of selfhood. We “remember” whatever we want to be. We make avatars, we're little girls in chat rooms, we live in the digital confabulation of the virtual online world Second Life, or we're Jayson Blair, the disgraced *New York Times* reporter who plagiarized and invented thirty-six of the seventy-three stories he wrote for the paper from 1998 to 2003, projecting himself into the landscapes of places he did not visit, into the homes of people he did not meet but quoted readily, creating new contexts for lifted facts.

Of course, there's another way to look at this work, and that's as a celebration of identity's promiscuity. To be weightless is to be free. To invent oneself over and over in an orgy of Walter Mitty-ish escape from the real (or simply, like Harry Potter, to put on an invisibility cloak and disappear) is to evade the gaze of the patriarchy, historicity, or the lashes of self-consciousness. Memory is the map of the self, and how each of us reads the map indicates the way we render what we were in the making of what we decide to be.

Whether it's a Freudian reading of inconstant dreams that are a puzzle of the past or a cellular reading of the patchy histories written in our genes, memory's very identity as a storehouse built on unreliable footings opens all the possibilities of invention and corruption, on both a personal and a social scale. These inferences hover above the cleverly destabilized portrait of Wiegand as a confabulation of the contemporary soul as much as they rumble beneath Grzeszykowska's un-portrait, her etiolated identity torn from her own history, self-deleted. Technology is making our private memories and the memories in the global mind seem more and more the substance of unlimited plasticity and recombinant potential. The moral compass spins. □

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