

Unbombing & Ars Memoria

An Interview with Tjebbe van Tijen

Geert Lovink

Interview – September 30, 2004

Visual artist and archivist Tjebbe van Tijen (1944) is interested in the functioning and the creation of collective memory. He concentrates on the gathering of data that generate meanings which deviate from official interpretations. This can lead to a more differentiated picture of the past and of the way in which we remember it. To this end Van Tijen makes use of material as well as virtual media and regards them as an inseparable whole. This interview by media theorist Geert Lovink focuses extensively, among other things, on Van Tijen's project *Unbombing the World 1911–2011*.

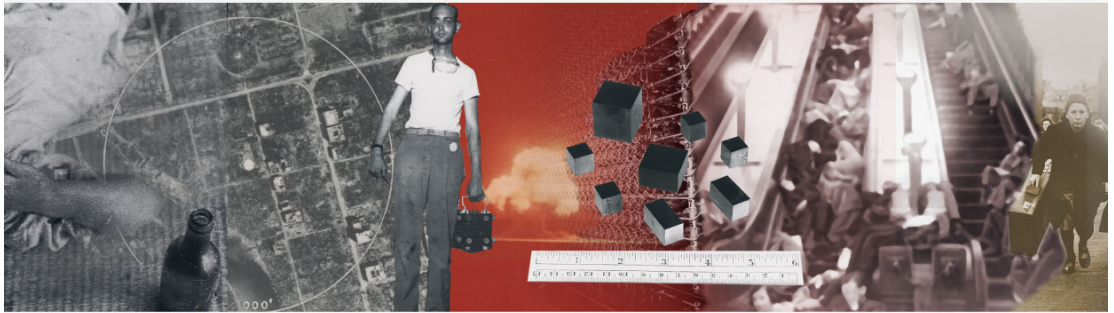


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'Will Thou sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' asks Abraham - only Lot and his daughters escape God's judgement of fire and brimstone that devastates Sodom - the monkey Hanuman similarly destroys the corrupt city of King Ravana on Lanka with his burning tail of fire

'The sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind' - the Revelations of St. John become an apocalyptic human judgement when Catholic troops bombard Protestant Magdeburg in 1631: 20,000 dead



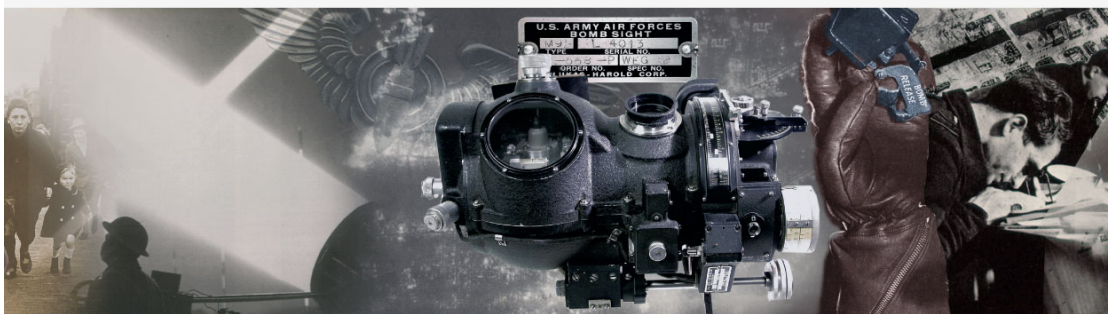
'water water' cries the girl, until she stops breathing (1945) - a US study 20 years later claims a total of 70,000 dead; the Japanese total is double that - the assembled core for the first atomic bomb test - the only colour photos of the Trinity explosion and uranium cubes show

the compact power of this apocalyptic giggling work - the Underground proved the best shelter during the Blitz on London - platforms, rails, corridors and escalators were full night after night - 60% of Londoners preferred their own risky beds



Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), painter of the Mona Lisa and undiscovered inventor of war machines and flying vessels - Benji's flying island of Laputa (1727) casts stones or crashes earthly rebels - Jesuit Luca Torti (1631-1687) decides against an airship capable of bombing ships and cities

the hot air balloons not just as for pleasure cruises or research but also as a war machine, as in this British plan (1799) for the annihilation of the French fleet - Jules Verne's airship, the Albatross (1886) as intervention force against barbarians - US fleet bombards the pirate city of Tripoli (1810)



'to this day I am still afraid of airplanes - for me an airplane means something evil that comes out of the sky' (German woman, 1992): 'There it is, bigger - straight ahead. Keep her steady', Lawrence called, watching the indicators as they crowded up his word-right, 'Eight seconds to go.'

there was often no visibility at all and bomb loads were pretty much dropped blindly, or a vague contour on a flickering radar screen was the only indication - looking through a magnifying glass at an aerial photo in order to find and mark targets - to analyse the damage done

, which speaks of a 'nation of the dead' through violence (at the time, 150 million), a book that was a turning point, 30 years ago, for Van Tijen's thinking about death and destruction. The database is intended to generate content for the Internet, but is not (yet) online. The system records not only biographical data, but also related contextual websites and (scanned) images and text quotations from books or other information objects. Van Tijen's system provides longer quotations that stand on their own. The quotations can be documented in detail, and the essential meaning is summed up in a single short sentence, like a headline. The collection of such 'monads' then provides a (frequently) poetic and associative 'entry' into the substance of a full quotation. Van Tijen attaches great importance to the physical form of the original information object, such as a book jacket. 'Book jackets say a great deal about the context. They are often lost. Academic libraries tend to throw them away to cut binding costs. This is also an expression of contempt toward the image and of the supremacy of the text in the academic environment.'

For Van Tijen, working with databases dates back to the 1970s, when he could only slavishly input data on the university's heavily secured mainframe computer. He saw the advent of the personal computer in the 1980s as a personal liberation, and it led to databases he designed himself using DOS, dBase and Clipper. For some time now, Tjebbe has been using Apple Macs with Filemaker software surrounded by special plug-ins and scripts.

Interview

Is there a biographical side to the Unbombing project?

The immediate inspiration came from my first visit to Japan, in 1995. I was picked up at the Narita airport by a hostess, an attractive lady who accompanied me to the campus of Keio University on the other side of Tokyo. As we drove through the city, I didn't see a single old building. You know about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but you don't realize that Tokyo was bombarded and burned to the ground. I was overwhelmed by a sense of shame because I had not known this. It reminded me of my travels through Germany after the war, in the early 1960s, and how those cities had been stripped of their soul. Often they had been set ablaze from the air – Hamburg, Berlin, Dortmund. Take Würzburg or Nuremberg, cities that were reconstructed, with concrete structures covered in authentic cladding and topped with wooden roofs as a result. Another detail is that during my early childhood I stayed with my grandmother, who lived on the Laan van Nieuw Oost-Indië in The Hague. Across the street lay the Bezuidenhout, which the RAF had bombarded by mistake; it remained in ruins for years and I used to play there. This is precisely where all those new office buildings now stand. And naturally you can also draw a connection to my later involvement with urban activism.

The *tabula rasa* that bombardments provide mostly coincides with the modernist approach to urban planning of CIAM / Charte d'Athènes and architects like Le Corbusier, who thought it was marvellous that entire cities had been razed, because they could come up with projects that would not otherwise have been possible. Just think of Mainz, where Marcel Lods, during the first years of post-war French occupation, comes up with a plan in the spirit of the Charte d'Athènes that virtually rewrites the entire pre-existing urban planning structure – the plan is ultimately not implemented – but also of Rotterdam, with its Lijnbaan, where nothing recalls the past and the high-rise housing estates are arranged in orderly formation to catch the maximum amount of light (following the adage 'light, air and space'). Amsterdam is a separate case – it was hardly bombarded from the air, but it is often said that a bombardment from within took place. If you look at the map of the demolition of houses during the famine winter of '44-'45 due to the firewood shortage, you can see that it coincides exactly with the Jewish quarter and with later reconstruction plans involving motorways, office buildings and the metro; at the time there was no talk of restoring old structures yet. The battle against the construction of the metro through the

Nieuwmarkt quarter came in the wake of the deportation of the Jewish population.

When you're building a database like this, are you also trying to evade the moral distinctions between bombardments in a 'good' or 'bad' cause?

Their greatest common denominator is remoteness, literally and figuratively. These days you can trace a Hamas leader using a mobile phone and take him out – a matter of transmitting spatial co-ordinates to a guided missile. Before, however, it was primarily a question of remoteness in terms of height. The higher you could fly, the smaller the chance that you would be shot down, since from the very beginning air attacks and anti-aircraft artillery were in competition.

I collect eyewitness accounts from victims as well as attackers. I just read a pilot's report from World War I which notes that during certain missions in bad weather, above the clouds, bombs were dropped blindly. You can imagine the sort of 'collateral damage' this must have caused, or how terrorized the cows must have been.

The aim of *Unbombing* is to show that compassion for victims has vanished, and to give them a voice once again. This violence especially emerges in the language. All this equipment, all those permits – contracts have to be signed, factories built to make planes and missiles; there have to be explosives, maps, targets – in short a whole carry-on to make bombing possible. What actually happens has to be camouflaged within all of this organization. The fact that it is about attacking people and their living environment, that military and civilian targets are barely, if at all, distinguishable, is buried under a layer of military jargon. In consultations with politicians and at press briefings the potential and the eventual victims of this are hardly visible, if at all. To this very day, at the Imperial War Museum in London, only a single display notes the thousands of bombardments of German cities, and then only in terms of 'economic targets', while the Blitz on London and other cities is dramatized with a genuine civilian air-raid shelter, which shakes and rattles and in which – thanks to an ingenious device – you can even smell fire. And we're talking about at least half a million bombing fatalities on the German side and forty to fifty thousand on the British side. I recently found photos of air force operations during the Suez crisis in 1956. In the entire book there was not a single word about civilian casualties. If you look more closely at some aerial photos, you can see that people lived right next to that railroad station, airport or military encampment.

World War I is often seen as a trench war, but at the same time the first experiments with air warfare were carried out then; cities like Cologne, Trier, Saarbrücken and Mainz were regularly bombarded – an eye for an eye – after all, the Germans flew over London, Antwerp, Liège and Paris with their Zeppelins, and when this proved ineffective, with the feared first heavy 'bombers', the Gothas.

The conquest 'of' the airspace from the very beginning also means a battle 'for' the airspace, and by extension for those that rule the land. It was about a lot more than 'dogfights' by heroic 'aces'. The old battlefield with forts and trenches was obsolete. The age of armies fighting each other was over. The entire population would be turned into 'combatants'. Military strategists, like the Italian general Douhet (1869–1930) in 1923, called for striking the vital centres of a nation, 'exposing the soft core', breaking the will of the people by conquering the enemy airspace and bombarding cities. If a government refused to capitulate, the populace would at the very least revolt against their government, in order to make the terror bombardments – 'strategic bombardments' in military jargon – stop. This doctrine was adopted by, among others, Mitchell (1879–1936), the father of the US Air Force, and also influenced RAF pioneer Trenchard (1873–1956) and continues to apply to this day. The city can turn into a battlefield at any moment. Whether this works is another matter. There was no rebellion by Japanese workers or the middle class against the Hirohito regime during the heavy bombardments of cities in 1945 – preceding Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and we saw the same thing in Yugoslavia in 1999, when the NATO

bombardments in fact created solidarity around Milosevic. Bombardments of civilians has an adverse effect, and yet they are still carried out – every day you can see the reverse psychological effect of air attacks, be it in Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine.

America's imperial power, the 'big stick policy', once based on gunships, is now primarily based on the air force. Practising terrorism in the name of anti-terrorism is wholly accepted. I am trying to offer a humanist point of view, to balance ends and means. Ultimately it is always about people. I recently found a contemporary protest book about large-scale Japanese bombardments of Chinese cities in 1937. Some people also still remember the Italian incendiary and gas bombs dropped on Ethiopia in this period. The Americans, at the time – before they entered World War II – found this 'barbaric', but a few years later they would be doing the same, and worse.

Unbombing is a project that essentially can never be finished. Nor can I do this project alone – it's too wide-ranging. I am developing a methodology – not just for this project, incidentally – by which participants can collect, input, classify and comment on data. The medium of the Internet seems the obvious solution. I would prefer to see it as a growing process, in which *Unbombing* can travel from city to city, with the 'virtual' component balanced by very material aspects.

For other projects you developed very tactile interactive interfaces. Do you intend to do the same for Unbombing?

I want to use traditional steel desks with empty sliding drawers (although now, with computers, drawers under desks are disappearing). The whole desk surface is a screen, and as the drawers glide from shut to open you can see the many thousands of bombardments since 1911 unfold. The desk as interface symbolizes the remoteness of war planning. In my *Unbombing the World* database, I've recorded over a thousand cities, villages and areas – this is just the number of places, not the number of air raids. In this tally of a thousand I count London only once, although it has been attacked many times, both in the First and Second World Wars, starting with Zeppelins and finally with V2 rockets. The inhabitants of Kabul have known air attacks since 1919, when the British were trying to bring the area under control, and subsequently it has been bombed by Russians, warlords fighting one another, and the Americans and their partners from 1978 to 2001. My current rough estimate of the total number of fatalities from air bombardments and rocket attacks now stands at more than a million deaths (see full bombardment [overview](#)), including the fact that fatality figures from bombardments during the Korea and Indochina wars are still difficult to estimate.

It is important to put the fatality figures in the right perspective. I recently found a book from the 1950s on the psychological effects of atomic warfare. It includes statistics from German and Japanese cities during World War II and how relative the reduction in population numbers actually was. There is a temporary dip in the statistics line, but it is quickly corrected. An influenza epidemic or SARS can have a much graver effect, it seems. And yet we feel much greater revulsion toward military violence.

It took a long time for the military to recognize the limited effect of bombing with only heavy explosives and move to systematically setting cities on fire. The Americans first built a mock-up of a portion of a Japanese city in order to test how it could best be set ablaze. Outrage about the Italian, German and Japanese air bombardments could and can be expressed without difficulty. Only a few during the war dared to condemn the fire bombing of German and Japanese cities. The Anglican bishop of Chichester, George Bell, spoke out in Parliament against 'indiscriminate bombing' and the American writer Lewis Mumford spoke of an 'unconditional moral surrender to Hitler'. If you look into the literature you find lawyers, ethicists, historians and sociologists who did indeed put the mass bombardments of cities during World War II and later in Korea and Indochina under the label of genocide, such as Leo Kuper (1908–1994), a South African lawyer and

sociologist who fled to the United States. This brings you to the ongoing discussion on the International Criminal Court and recent proposals for the creation of a court not only for 'winners' but also for the 'losers'.

When you read the details on Indochina and what was dropped there in the 1960s and 1970s... I did demonstrate against the bombardments in Cambodia, in the early 1970s, but I had really no idea how extensive, dirty and vicious that was. This is untouched history. Statistics are important in this regard, in order to draw comparisons. There will be never be exact numbers, a precise body count, and the estimates of 'the historical camp' can vary widely, but the order of magnitude can be determined. Japanese and German casualties are on the order of hundreds of thousands of deaths. The Netherlands during World War II, in contrast, was on the order of thousands. Many still see aerial bombardments as a necessary evil and certainly not as 'genocide', because in their estimation there was no intention to kill entire populations based on religion or race. Others criticize the limitations of the definition and seek new terms to describe these acts of terror, like the political scientist and statistician Rummel with his term 'democide'...

How would you create a non-official memorial and what constitutes the need for this, in your view?

You could erect a stone engraved with the most evocative panoramic photo of a bombarded city. Next to this would stand a cauldron with glowing charcoal (symbolizing the burning city), from which you would take a piece of coal. You could take a sheet of paper and make an impression, a rubbing of this stone. You could also combine several cities or fragments. Then there would be a washbasin in which you could wash your hands 'in innocence'. A stone would be erected in every city to which the exhibition travels.

This idea comes from the tradition of public monuments, which often originated from temporary memorials temporarily erected by survivors and relatives, some of which later received official status and evolved into local and sometimes national memorials. Think of the Ossuarium in Verdun, which is a memorial to the victims of trench warfare. In the small Vietnamese city of Dien Bien Phu, where the French were defeated, they are now reconstructing the trenches of the time in order to attract tourists. Therefore there will also be a heroes' monument to the people who died there. I see this sort of monuments as a cartography of human violence. This also includes the absent monuments, as in the case of Tokyo, which in fact has no public monument for the more than one hundred thousand dead that fell during the American bombardments in 1945.

We make choices as to which monuments have meaning for us or not – and we even make new ones. The important thing is how monuments can be explicated. What interests me is whether you can make a monument in which you make room for opposing views of what happened. Until now monuments have been mostly national stories that provide only one viewpoint. What surprises me is the huge number of monuments and statues that were designed but never built, memorials that were made but never erected, or erected only to be taken down again. In the Netherlands, for instance, you find no monuments to the Batavian Republic that emerged from the Patriot Movement at the end of the eighteenth century. Yet there was an Italian sculptor who made one. A remnant of that monument represents one of the leaders, Joan Derk van der Cappelen tot den Pol, and still stands in a garden in Rome. So after the fall of the Dutch monarchy, a lorry can be dispatched to Rome to pick up that statue and put it up after all.

How do you see the relationship between virtual and material monuments? Am I right in thinking that you want to add a stone portal to the Internet?

There are already thousands of books on bombardments. So that's not the reason for doing this. You always make choices. Everything is turned into fiction; you can't avoid that. It always gets documented and preserved, romanticized and dramatized, even if you think,

like Adorno, that it should not be made into poetry.

I want to make monuments that exist beyond the unity of a single viewpoint. Just look at Iraq – you see it happening there already. There are websites from prominent news media on which you can read about and see how many and which American soldiers have been killed. Fortunately there are now also groups trying to do the same in terms of Iraqi civilians. You can be tempted to think that as such documentation efforts are made, the number of victims is also shrinking. But then you suddenly get the genocide in Ruanda and this is no longer the case. This was killing with kitchen knives, facilitated by interactive radio. These were active listeners indeed, and we can expect more of the same. It begs the question whether genocide is something that is only initiated and committed by evil politicians and statesmen, as some academics claim.

What my projects can bring about is placing data in a better perspective. People often have a moral problem at the start. They cannot or refuse to make a distinction between 5,000 and 500,000 dead; some numbers seem to be beyond comprehension. I say you have to try. Huge numbers can always be broken down into smaller units in which a multitude of stories lie. Unlike the Spielberg archive, in which everything is cast in a single format, I place a high value on a variety of viewpoints and opinions, and a variety of sources. The *Unbombing* project includes texts by military planners, pilots' logbooks, attackers as well as defenders, memories of those who were bombarded, in the form of autobiographies, letters, interviews, schoolchildren's essays, and so forth, with links to original documents and the places where these can be found. The Spielberg archive contains set questionnaires, video interviews with Holocaust survivors conducted according to a set protocol – a sort of 'Legoization' of history. I do not question the therapeutic effect of the Spielberg method – it is primarily useful for the survivors and relatives. My approach looks more at the planners, the attackers and the victims of bombardments, the response of urban planners, and lets divergent and opposing viewpoints stand alongside one another, without drawing conclusions. Of course there is also a process of selection, but I hope that methods can be found to permit the choosing of material by many participants from differing positions and viewpoints. If you just search on the Internet for the words Dresden and Hiroshima, you find numerous pages filled with lively debates and highly divergent views. The visitor or user of the *Unbombing* project is not confronted with certainties, but rather made to doubt things. They are stimulated to come to their own insights.

In many of your projects you use the roll as a medium, in which the user, on paper or on a screen, scrolls back and forth along a panorama of Photoshopped images flowing into one another.

When the Internet started out the idea of vertical scrolling, the *rotulus*, played a significant role. Many web designs are based on pages, yet a lot of information is presented by flipping through windows. Horizontal scrolling never caught on, because it was considered awkward and the software seemed unsuited for it. This does play a role for text in our writing, because your eye has to jump from the end of a horizontal line to the beginning of a new one, but this is not true of images. You should not break up text in columns that are too wide, but images have hardly any such restrictions. Sadly images are still treated as illustrations for text – the other way round is also possible.

These days I mostly use digital scrolls in lectures, but I have also used paper scrolls with a camera set up above. In an installation on shamanism for the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam in 1997 there are physical scrolls with handles in a wooden cabinet as well as digital scrolls projected onto a drumhead. They were already in the *Museum of Revolution* in 1989 as well. At the time they were film projectors with a roll of images in a loop showing a series of revolutionary monuments.

The use of scrolls as information carriers is as old as humanity itself; natural materials, like

tree bark, cactus leaves or papyrus, were hammered and pasted together and served as bearers of images and writing characters. This is one of the things I show in my Panorama of Pre-Cinematic Principles for the 'Future Cinema' exhibition. The moral of this story is that 'new media' are not all that new and have a long history. I also want to show that inventions do not appear out of thin air, but often consist of new combinations of existing principles. Cinema, for instance, is the result of a combination of scientific discoveries and 'bricolage'. A few years ago, during the 'Next Five Minutes' media conference, I tried to sum up 4,000 years of multimedia forms in a 40-minute performance lecture, which sadly failed due to a lack of preparation and available resources, but to this day I am interested in shadow play, spinning tops, fireflies and spinning fire pots. People have known for a long time that the eye is slow and makes up its own story out of the movement of light. It's important to show the simplicity in learning processes, how high tech and low tech relate to each other.

A historic example of the scroll is Trajan's Column in Rome, which tells of the Romans' conquest and plundering of Dacia, the present-day Romania. This is, as it were, a pole around which a scroll with a story in pictures is wrapped. This pillar used to stand between two libraries, one of which contained scrolls, *volumina*, and the other bound, paginated books, *codices*. You can also think of rock paintings, murals and frescoes, from Mayan frescoes in Bonampak to medieval church frescoes in Italy, Greek and Cambodian temple friezes, the Parthenon and Angkor Wat. There are endless art history debates about how you should read these. The viewer animates the image during his stroll, just as the paintings on Greek or Mayan plates, vases and bowls can be brought to life by turning them. Thinking in separate pages, leafing through quickly, is a modern phenomenon. The continuous surface of image and text was shattered at a certain point, in part because in the Western printing process type and image had to be mounted separately. The zigzag books still produced in Asia, based on wooden blocks onto which both text and images are carved, offer a nice middle course between bounded pages and scroll. In unrolling and rolling up a scroll a panoramic surface comes into view, offering an overview and assisting short-term memory. You can see where you're coming from and where you're going. Both in the Roman picture story on Trajan's Column and in East Asian scrolls, you see separate scenes made to flow into one another by their creators. The way we still speak of 'a scene unfolding'. The scroll is a quintessential narrative medium. The beauty of making scrolls is that you often start from the image, which conjures up new associations through all sorts of combinations. You might only later go looking for text to fit the image, and by 'making arguments with images' you also arrive at insights other than from the study of text alone.

When one thinks of new media one often thinks of virtuality. In your work, by contrast, you put the emphasis on media and memory as matter.

The eye and the ear are being privileged over the senses of smell and touch. In the ZKM in Karlsruhe you can see that during an exhibition like 'The Future of Cinema', attention is devoted to the material and historical aspects of media. Yet this does not happen as often as you would like. At the Waag in Amsterdam, which calls itself the Society for Old and New Media, I have yet to see old media represented, and that also applies to V2 in Rotterdam, which is primarily imbued with a futurist-oriented technophilia. It is a short-sighted view of what 'new media' can be. You often see museums, when they want to appear modern, resort to Disney-like or futuristic installations. They fail to see how older principles, older forms of interface could be integrated. In order to look forward, you have to be prepared to look back.

My database, Ars Memoria System, comes from the long tradition of the 'commonplace books', *florilegia*, anthologies in which interesting fragments from other books and writings were copied and arranged. These collections of quotations, collections of 'commonplaces', '*loci communi*', were a collective preservation and classification system of knowledge. University libraries are now beginning to see the value of such 'commonplace books'. Until recently they were not taken seriously, because they were not original works,

but seemed to consist merely of copies. I had an argument about this at the Institute for Social History. It concerned whether certain newspaper-clipping collections should be kept or not. These days these are often discarded because the newspapers themselves are archived anyway. The value of newspaper-clipping collections is not the information in the clippings itself, but the connections a particular collector has made among all these clippings, the personal way of arranging them and the insights derived from this. What I now make are idiosyncratic bibliographies and documentation collections; the standardized descriptions and links need only be done by a small number of competent libraries, and anyone can obtain this easily in this or that format from the Internet. The important thing is the freedom to make fresh selections and combinations out of the same sources – the *'ars combinatoria'* along with *the 'ars memoria'*. Many different pancakes can be made from flour, eggs, milk and a pinch of salt.

Links

- Text archive: www.iisg.nl
- Website with project overview: www.imaginariumuseum.org
- Proposal: www.imaginariumuseum.org
- Mapping Human Violence: www.imaginariumuseum.org
- Ars Memoria System scroll: www.imaginariumuseum.org
- Earlier interview with Tjebbe van Tijen from 1994: www.mediamatic.net

Geert Lovink is a media theorist, Internet critic and author of *Social Media Abyss* (2016), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), *Zero Comments* (2007) and *Dark Fiber* (2002). Since 2004 he is researcher in the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences where he is the founder of the Institute of Network Cultures. His centre recently organized conferences, publications and research networks such as *Video Vortex* (the politics and aesthetics of online video), *Unlike Us* (alternatives in social media), *Critical Point of View* (Wikipedia), *Society of the Query* (the culture of search), *MoneyLab* (Internet-based revenue models in the arts) and a project on the future of art criticism. From 2004–2013 he was also associate professor in Media Studies (new media), University of Amsterdam. Since 2009 he is professor at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee / Malta) where he supervises PhD students.

Footnotes

1. See also Geert Lovink, *Uncanny Networks, collection of interviews*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002.

Tags

Activism, Image, Media Society, Memory

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