

# Lost Media

A conversation with the Werker Collective

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## ***Intro starts!***

Werker Collective is a multifaceted initiative by Marc Roig Blesa and Rogier Delfos in Amsterdam in 2009. It operates in the themes of labour, ecofeminism and the lgbtqi+ movements in favor of an image critique of daily life, to analyze what is made visible and what remains hidden or silenced in different political contexts. The project started by releasing ten issues of a publication called Werker Magazine.

Their different profession (Marc is a photographer, and Rogier is a graphic designer) enables them to generate great chemical reaction, which creates rich contents in their works.

The interview took place on May 25th via Zoom, and it lasted for about 50 minutes.

The Werker Collective was sitting behind their computer, surrounded by their books and magazines in their workplace.

Werker explained us about their practice and how they work with their archive. We wanted to know how to create alternative narratives out of lost media, which are private photos and films from cameras we bought at thrift stores.

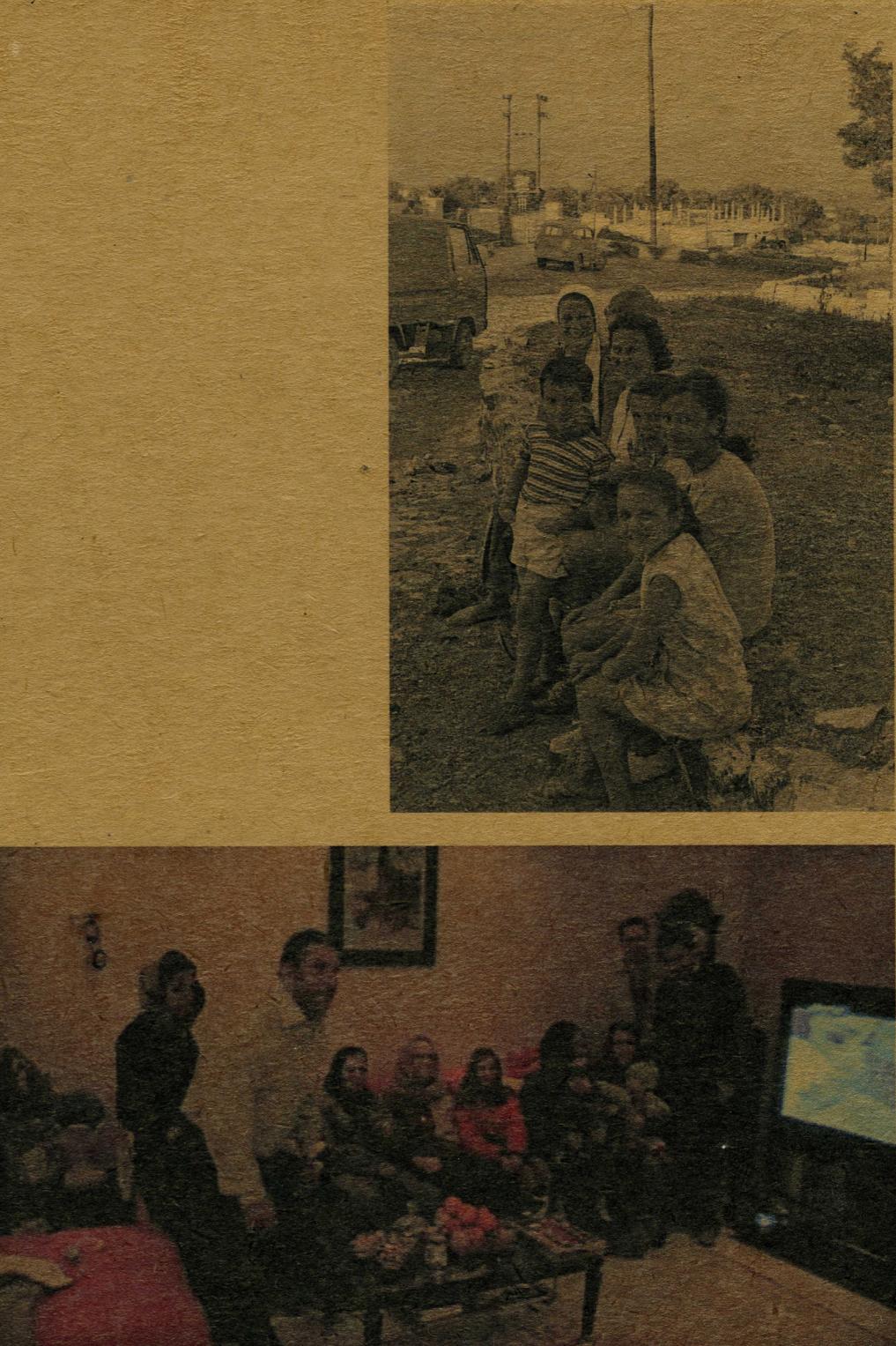
## ***Let's begin the interview!***

*Us:*

We would like to talk about the Werker's archive and working as a collective. We are interested in lost medias, we found some ourselves, in the streets and flea markets.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

Lost media? I haven't heard of that before, I like the idea of lost media.



*Werker collective (Marc):*

The principle of this archive is also the idea of leftover, an archive that has been shaped through secondhand bookstores, book markets, donations from people. Not only historical data but also from our workshops where new materials get created. It is a mix between historical and contemporary materials.

*Us:*

We were wondering where you found these pictures. If you find archives like these and you don't know where it is coming from, how does it work with the copyrights. How do you collect the materials, your intention, how do you pull out meaning from each material, like a text or a photograph, in short, we are curious about how do you edit the collected materials?

*Werker collective (Marc):*

We can start explaining how everything started, it comes from one book entitled *Photography Politics One*. I found it in a second hand bookstore, it was for the first time we got to know about the **Worker Photography Group**. There is a chapter talking about this movement of socialists photographers self-educated themselves on the use of the camera, producing alternative representations of daily life ; their aims, their working and housing conditions, the situation of their political engagement on the street, the demonstrations, etc.

They did that in order to provide images for the leftist press to give an alternative to the mainstream media, which was of course dominated by a more conservative content. But this movement, even though I was educated in photography, and I was always very interested in politics and photography, it really did not make it to the museums at that time when I studied. Now it is getting better in certain parts of the world, they are paying more attention to it. But even now, I still talk to curators and they don't know about the *Worker Photographers*!

What is fascinating about these people is that they were self-educated, learning from each other, having a very strong sense of image critique. For example, this (*Marc shows image in a book*) would be one of their community darkrooms in London. And there is one great image, which is the picture of a living room that has been transformed into a darkroom for developing pictures. **You come to understand how resistance and counter-representations of daily life have been self-organized in domestic spaces and repurposing these spaces and the limited capacities we have into a space for politics.** Here you can see this living room transformed. Here is for example one class where they are learning on photography.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

We can explain how we do things. I am a photographer and Rogier is a graphic designer. The photography and archival practice comes very much from my own interest. Rogier is much more interested in the questions of collaborative design, editing, developing methods of collectively editing and designing materials.

About the materials, they can come from many different sources, sometimes we are collecting images from commercial magazines that we find relevant because of the topic. The focus of the archive is labour, sexuality and gender.



*Werker collective (Marc):*

At the moment we are opening the archive to the question of ecology, because we came to realize that the last 10 years we've been really much interested in human rights, from the side of minorities and non-literal normative bodies, non white bodies. But we were kind of forgetting that these forms of oppression are very much related with ecosystems where non human bodies are also suffering. This human bodies and non human bodies part is at the moment being very much researched in the archive.

Then, how to give meaning to this is always through collaborative practice. We collect, we compile, but **our archive is a site for political imagination**. How do these materials, lost materials or leftover materials, become tools to produce together with other people who are interested in *political imagination* and *political speculation*? What you see on the shelves, for example (*pointing bookshelf behind them*) if you select the topic domestic work, you can start looking in the archive for images and documents about this particular topic. Then, the documents can generate a very rich material because it goes further than your own thinking.

**Image critique and working with the archive are ways of generating historical perspectives that are able to rewrite history, but also to speculate on ways of creating future politics.** That's how we understand the archive.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

The archive is compiled of 3000 or 3500 publications including posters, pamphlets, magazines. They come from all over the world, from second markets, some of them have been donated. The publishing origins are also from all over the world, but a lot of it is western. The oldest document is from the 1860s' or 1870s'?

*Werker collective (Marc):*

It's from 1871, the Paris Commune. This year is the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune which was the first self-organized worker government in Paris in modern history.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

And then are documents from all kind of political regimes, like within capitalist regimes, communist regimes or nazi Germany. There's all kinds of stuff.

Some documents are here sometimes only because of one image that we find interesting and then the book itself perhaps less so. But that one image can be important for us, and could be important for generating this *image critique*, so it has to be part of the archive. What you see here around us (*looking at the bookshelves behind them*) is a first tryout and a setup to do image critique sessions by putting images from different documents and publications next to each other. We can show a bit.

Werk collectief (Rogier):

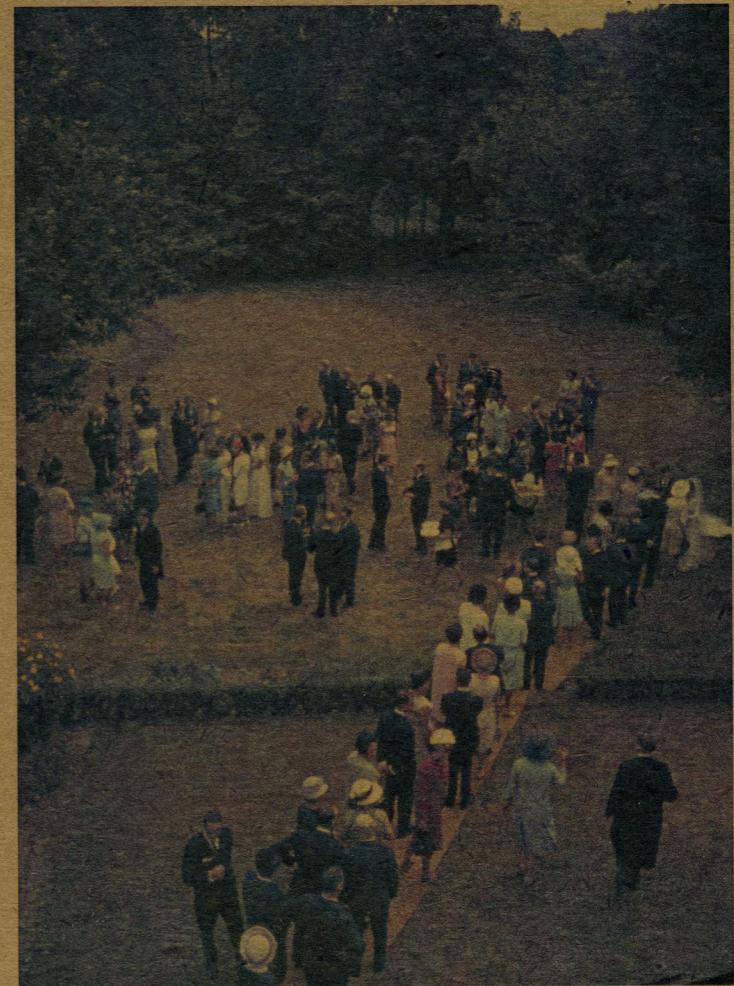
(While opening the book and show it to us) This is not a narrative that has been created, but more to see what happens if you open pages and how images start to interact with each other.

*Us:*

So part of the work can be of how to arrange pictures on pages in order to let them speak.



(Rogier stood up and walked to the bookshelf, and took one book in his hand.)

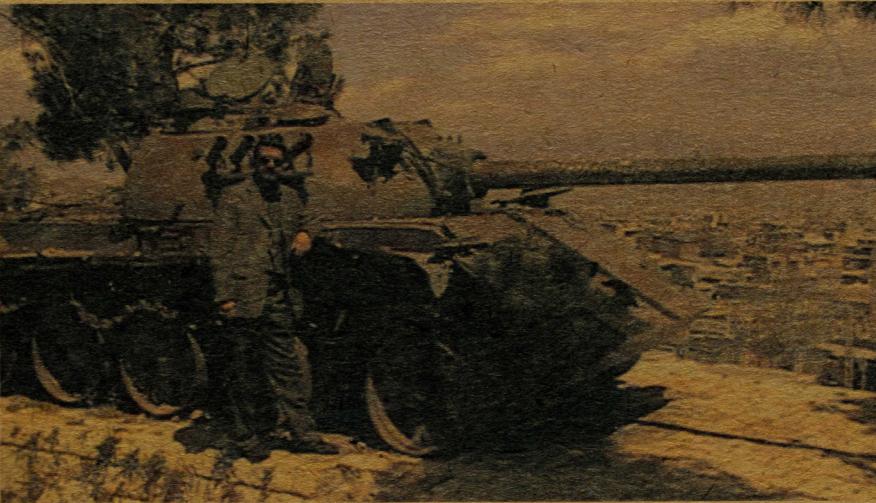


*Werker collective (Marc):*

Yes, one of the methods we are using still from the *Worker Photographer Movement* is called *builder critique*, which is *image critique*. There was a small section from the *Worker Photography Magazine (1920s)* where people sent their own pictures and then the people from the magazine gave comments on the pictures both from a technical point of view and also composition wise.

But also from a political point of view, for example when somebody sends a picture of a demonstration, they would make comments about how you could also photograph the preparation of the demonstration. It was really an amateur education on photography. It's only based on technology, for example, how to capture the movement of a surfer jumping a wave? or how to take a beautiful portrait? But their *builder/image critique* feedback would be also about ideology and image analysis.

We are using this method which is : **what happens when you place many images next to each other from different backgrounds?**



(Marc took a pile of pictures in his hands, and showed them one by one)

*Werk collective (Marc):*

For example, this is a set of pictures that we've been doing with a group of elderly people in Barcelona, they have a group of volunteers that take them out every week and do activities together. What happens when you photograph the lives of these people and when you put on these pictures together with them on a table? You can really see the situation and decide to make it visible, to create more awareness about the risks of exclusion of elderly people with reduced mobility, or you can decide to map out the different aspects that came across this collective picture making. **That's a way to activate social progress through image analysis.**

This method is more used in contemporary projects, but you can do the same with history. By opening books and pamphlets from different moments in history you can use this *image critique analysis* to understand how those images were made and with what purpose and how you can rearrange them. It is very much close to the ways of thinking of Walter Benjamin (German philosopher, 1892 - 1940) when he talked about the idea of philosophy and history like a constellation. **When you put different elements next to each other, it creates some kind of crystals that allow you to understand time and have different perspectives of time, because usually history has been written from a specific perspective with a specific interest.** That's why for example history is mostly representing man even in our history. Why? Because if you dominate the narrative of history you dominate the world, and if you dominate women you dominate the reproduction of humans, that's why women are oppressed because they are more powerful than men because they can reproduce humanity.

Thus, there is this very big need, and this archive is trying to queer history, the idea of creating *her* story not history. It's to write, to rewrite *her* story into history from the side, from the narratives that have been excluded.



*Werk collective (Marc):*

And about copyrights, for example the worker photographer movement, one of the aspect that you notice in their publications is that **they were sharing images, informations and they were republishing works. It was circulating between them and they would spread the relevant things. It was never a question of the copyrights.** Actually very often, people would prefer not to have their name under the pictures, to show more the collective aspect of the documentary. But also to protect themselves from situations of vulnerability where they could be accused of being communists or these kind of things. Therefore, following these principles **we republish documents that we find relevant and we republish documents of collectives on alliances, groups that might share our ideas.**

But there is another aspect of the copyright. If you are an artist or a person who has freedom of the speech, you are able to comment on the politics of representation. For example, if we publish a magazine with 75 different images from many different contexts on certain topics, our position is that we create a visual essay. What we publish is our visual essay that is using fragments from many different places to construct this narrative. Copyright is gonna be a problem if you would for example copy one whole publication and then use it for an advertisement of coca cola and make thousands of euros, the author will of course claim copyrights on the content.

*Werk collective (Rogier):*

That's a little simplified of course, but there is **this idea of making political collaging because all that matters is how we perceive it.** Thus, we are re-appropriating, re-purposing these images and creating alternative narratives with them. We believe that such narratives belong to the realm of artistic freedom, without losing its context. We are not reprinting images in high quality framing them and placing them in a gallery. It would be a different story.

*Werk collective (Marc):*

And we always reference content, the idea is that we are publishing archives and materials, and if somebody would make a scandal we could decide to censor that image. We take the risk, on the benefit of our freedom of the speech and of our practice of working with images and commenting on images that have been made. What happened in one magazine we made is that one of the images that we published was from a photographer from *Magnum Photography Agency*. We know that they have a very big lawyer for their copyrights, we are also not interested in publishing a picture from *Magnum Photography Agency*. We are interested in publishing things that are kind of forgotten or lost.

*(Marc took another magazine in his hand, started showing pages to us.)*

*Werker collective (Marc):*

For example, we found this magazine in Bolonia years ago, it's called *Fototeca* and it's an amazing thing. It's a magazine about photography but it's kind of photography and taboo and sexuality and anything, image cover, visual culture and all the layouts are...*(keep flipping pages with excitement)*...going all over the place and images, images, and sexuality and I don't know what. So, if we republish a spread of this in a magazine from ours, these people are of course gonna be fine because we are from the same school in the sense that we believe, we love, and we think we have to constantly renegotiate and discuss the images of others. This copyright thing is something that a lot of the students ask, this is based on the idea of private property which we are not so interested in, because we are images. If images are allowed to inform my body, my aesthetics and my identity, how come am I not allowed to comment on how those images? So it's about my freedom rights and my capacity to fight back and to say; okay, i have all these genders stereotypes, all these etc, but now with those images I can also shape new politics that can represent better who I am or denounce how I feel.

*Us:*

Do you see yourself responsible for preserving forgotten, lost media? Then, in this sense do you digitalize books or photographs in order to preserve them?



*Werker collective (Rogier):*

Actually, one of the main topic we are dealing with right now is how to start to digitalize the archive. It costs a lot of labour and men power to do so. We're actually lacking that in order to digitalize everything but we would love to. We made already decision to only digitalize the particular images or things that we are interested in. That would somehow maintain the archive throughout the years, even if the paper would decay, although most of the books we have are in quite good state. That is something that we are working on right now and want to start this year.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

This archive we call it now «archive open rooms». Usually an archive digitalizes the volumes closed. You have this book, (shows the *Fototeca* magazine), that would be for example about photography and sexuality. But a book has plenty of pictures and this picture for example, is about holidays so if this book is on the photography and sexuality, you know what I mean...

*(Rogier pointed out one spread in the book.)*

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

This spread is only particularly based on holiday then that should be possible to find it too, so most likely in this case because there is a lot of content there would be several spreads that would be digitalized but then there is also pages or there is also books that have one page. Afterwards it's also an ongoing progress. Through the workshops that we are doing, through the collaborative practice that we are maintaining, it might be that other people propose layouts or pages also to be digitalized. We are also thinking about how could it be done with some kind of machine that we set up permanently so we can easily digitalized quite quickly when the need is there.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

We want also that everybody that comes to the archive creates their own categories, so we decided not to create categories. Categories are temporary and they are always switching. This book one day because of a spread will be in sexuality and another day will be in holiday. Everything is a process that we are doing. And with the digital aspect, we also have to be very careful, because some documents have a certain location. For example, this book is located in Amsterdam in a certain neighborhood, which means it's a part of the history of this neighborhood.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

But what happens when you digitalize it and put it online? People can be using this whole archive for their purposes that are totally separated from our interests. We do believe that an online archive can be very helpful for all the communities that have been crossing our archives to be in touch and learn from each other. But we want to do it in a certain way in terms of collective agreement. You have to belong to a certain, social space in order to use the materials and to share what we're doing with it.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

That's I think the way that we're trying to tackle that issue. There is a certain responsibility in dealing with these documents and this responsibility is then automatically a part of how you work together and how a person that it is part of a community is interested in using certain documents, so it doesn't just spread.

And **this brings us to the point of visibility or no visibility.** We're dealing a lot with images, this artifact is an archive of groups of open boxes of images. That's a lot about visibility. But the question of invisibility is just as relevant because **invisibility can be just as important for political reasons.** For example of undocumented people or people themselves, people not with the right documents for the geography they are in. Kinds of labor conditions that shouldn't be published because otherwise the person will might lose their job etc. So, there is also **this idea of invisibility that we also do enrich regularly when we publish our contents.**

*Us:*

We were wondering if you recognized or discovered similar movement as the worker photographer movement, but nowadays?

*Werker collective (Marc):*

Yeah, of course, yeah.

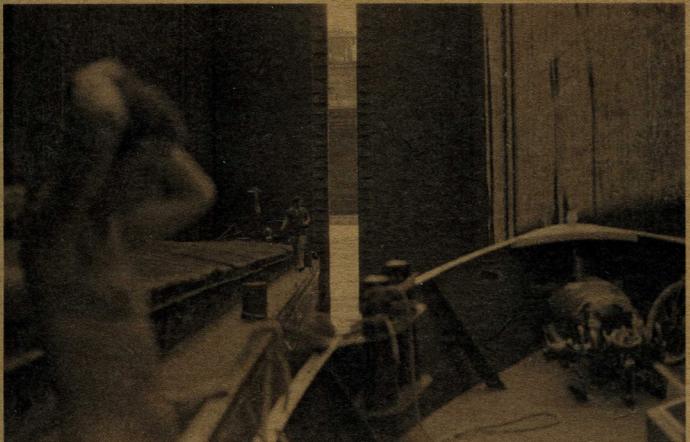
*Werker collective (Rogier):*

There's lots of photo clubs, I guess in the world still.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

Yeah, there's been some old activist groups. For example, there is one very close friends of ours called *Activestills*. They're from Palestine and are photographing all the struggle in Israel Palestine. It's more of a photojournalist activist group. They do photography exhibitions on the street, they just break photocopies and paste it on the street, this is kind of a method from the worker photographer movement. That wall newspaper kind of movement. But the main aspect of the worker photographer movement is the self-representation. The idea that you are the one that is going to photograph your own situation around neighborhoods, or your own labor conditions. In London for example, in the 70's, the business scholar called Stuart Hall (Jamaican-British sociologist, 1932 - 2014), participated in the development of the *Cultural Studies*.

It's about media, politics and class. For example, and this is very much related with Antonio Gramsci (Italian philosopher, 1891 - 1937) who is an Italian communist leader, which was the first one to talk about *Cultural hegemony*. He came to realize in the 20's that the common movement was only thinking about how to take control over the factories and their means of production of how we produce things. But then you don't only have to take control over the factories, but actually over the culture or cultural hegemony. So, we all agree that children go to school, or a man and a woman marry and then have children. Well, there's all of these cultural agreements that allow any form of society. So Gramsci's idea was that we had to transform the media, we have to transform the culture from a different perspective, from a liberated perspective in order to change the capitalist way of organizing society. Gramsci's project took place in the 60s and 70s. It created a whole new discipline called Cultural studies, which was to reassess the society from the perspective of gender, class, sexuality, through media and media analysis. For example, they would start to read. They would say that **'you can read a room if you go to a bar ; by analyzing the furniture, the images that are in the bar and the way people are behaving in this bar'.** You can unfold the whole structure of a consensus that makes this thing how it is. And then you can change it. You can say no. Instead of a woman being the bartender, we're going to have this young teenager doing this a lot. This would totally change and create counterculture. **The aim of cultural studies was to produce a counterculture or a culture from beneath that could replace the status quo. For a free and vanguardist society. And these people were working with image analysis and the politics of representation.**



*Us:*

Thank you for the references!

We're also doing this interview out of a typography class. We want to ask about the use of text in your publications and the use of fonts. How important is typography and text in your works? How do you see the typography playing a role in your work?

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

We see text as relevant and important. We use text as image in our operations. We publish pages of existing books, images alongside packages. When we publish something we are trying to question what we are publishing. Using forms of design inherent to the content. So it's less important for us to focus on design. We want to focus on the content firstly, but depending on how you want this content to be communicated, there are ways of letting design guide the person that reads the publication. Furthermore, **we try to play with cultural references, historical references, relating to modernism or amateurism.**

*Us:*

Yeah.

*Us:*

What we have is our own little archive that are more private medias we found in the streets and we don't know where it is coming from. And our research on your collective and your methods of working made us start thinking about how we can make these materials speak too.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

For example, it's important for us to make sure that publications don't look like they are (or if they do they play with it) from let's say, the capitalist regime or something that is more focused on selling something rather than questioning something.

Furthermore, we mostly use a font that we have developed ourselves throughout time. We keep on playing with it every time and adjusting it slightly every time we use it. It is a classic sans-serif font based on a variety of modern fonts, the oldest one would be 1890's, Akzidenz Grotesk. But, ranging to newer ones from the 90s and even 2000s, it's a bit of a mix of everything. They come together and with that we try to be conscious with what we use, see what it refers to. There is this big question mark always central in how we accomplish things.

Depending on the content, we're researching on the origins of the exhibition space for example. We also try to adapt the materials that we work with, with the languages that we're using. In short, questioning what we're doing through materiality not only through content but also through design.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

Sometimes we have also worked with magnetic walls.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

Yeah, on the practical level, there are tons of solutions that are evident in, how people can write with it, for us it's also very important. So **besides the context that we are working in, which usually informs on how we work and how we materialize things, it's essential that the people that we are working with on the project are engaged into in the in the final making of the exhibitions.** We set up methods so people can move things around. The method can be reduced in a different context, a different institution. We try to make sure that the exhibitions that we set up have the same way of engaging with the material. It's not so static usually.

*Werker collective (Marc):*

**The idea of the exhibition space is a 'space of production', not a 'space of contemplation'.**

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

Yes, I would say we have to go to the next meeting soon. But yeah, we have a bit of margin if you're if you have some more questions.

So how are you're going to use all of this?

*Werker collective (Marc):*

Quite amazing stuff about the, I would call radical photography, because what's happening right now is that everybody's photographing and instagramming a lot. It's great. It is a social practice of therapy now universalized where much more people have access to cameras, but at the same time, this new media.

It's super wealthy. And multinational corporations are commodifying this practice for their own benefit, we're kind of all addicted to the screen. It's the counter example of how the worker photographers of radical amateur photography practiced I imagine. A generalized image practice. To make images of daily life can be super liberating and a form of learning from your surroundings and changing things. But at the same time, the social media platforms became a medium for self-control, self-promotion, commodifying all aspects of our lives.



*Us:*

It was a crappy camera quality, yeah? I looked like a potato.~

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

Alan Smegmas(?) wrote some very interesting texts on that. The communication of photography through mass consumption. And the idea that the expensive camera is actually central in amateur photography. This might be relevant for you if you're dealing with lost media or media that you found in private archives made by people. Have a look into other segments writing. There's a very good manifesto like paragraph that specifically talks about it. About, the commodity of the camera, central for self-registration through photography.

*Us:*

Nice, thank you very much!

*Werker collective (Marc):*

Well, keep us updated about your project, all right? We would like to see it after.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

And you could come and visit. Maybe sometime in the summer if it still is still useful for you then, it would be better.

*Us:*

We'll do! Thank you for your time. Thank you, thank you.

*Werker collective (Rogier):*

Pleasure, have a nice day.

*Us:*

Yeah, you too. Bye bye~

